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DISMAL SWAMP**



"HE BEGAN TO TURN THE MOVING BOAT
TO ONE SIDE"

THE CAMPFIRE AND TRAIL SERIES

LOST
IN THE
GREAT DISMAL SWAMP

BY
LAWRENCE J. LESLIE



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NEW YORK

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—THE SUDDEN CALL	17
II.—A MISSING CHUM	28
III.—BRAVE HEARTS TO THE RESCUE	39
IV.—PLUNGING INTO THE SWAMP	52
V.—A STARTLING THEORY	63
VI.—WHAT THE TRACKS TOLD	71
VII.—THE PERILS THAT LAY IN WAIT	82
VIII.—FROM BAD TO WORSE	93
IX.—STEVE'S SWAMP CAMP FIRE	103
X.—THE WATCHER BEHIND THE BUSHES	115
XI.—TED SHAFTER'S WAY OF GETTING EVEN	123
XII.—ON THE TRACK	134
XIII.—STUMBLING INTO NEW DANGER	145
XIV.—AT THE END OF THE TRAIL	156
XV.—WHAT WAS COMING TO TED SHAFTER	166
XVI.—STEVE FINDS OUT—Conclusion	176

LOST IN THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP.

CHAPTER I.

THE SUDDEN CALL.

“HELLO! Is that you, Steve?”

“Just who it is, Max. Say, I could tell your voice over the wire among a thousand. What’s doing?”

“A whole lot. Owen is here at my elbow, and getting ready with a rush for a hurry trip. I’m going to call up Toby Jucklin, as soon as I switch off from your number, and have him get around here in double-quick time.”

“What in the wide world——”

“Can’t stop to answer any questions right now, Steve. Every second’s worth a heap to us. Tell me, do you think you could get away for a couple of days or so? Quick!”

“Gee whiz! but who’s rushing the mourners now, tell me? Talk about calling me ‘Touch-and-go Steve’; I guess there’s another fellow in the same running with me.”

“Can you go?”

“You mean right now, Max?”

"Yes. It's just nine o'clock. I'm having the little gas-wagon Billikin, the livery man, rents out, come around for us in half an hour. It ought to get us up there before noon, easy."

"For gracious' sake, tell me *where*, can't you, Max?"

"I will, when you come; if you can't get off, say so right now, Steve."

"Get off? Wow! You couldn't hold me in old Carson with a rope, after what you've told me. I was printing from some photo negatives of our other trips; and just started to get ready for a bath when the phone bell jingled."

"Are you coming over right away, then?"

"You just bet I am, Max, as fast as my feet will carry me. Wait up for me. My folks are all away, and won't be home till the end of the week; but I'll lock up, and run over. Hello, Max!"

"Yes, don't shout so, Steve. I'm here still, on the wire. What do you want now?"

"Shall I fetch my gun along; p'r'aps we might need it; you never can tell?"

"Oh, do as you please about that; I'm taking mine with me, and maybe we might be glad to have 'em. Now I want to get Toby on the wire. So long!"

Steve Dowdy hung up the receiver hastily, and immediately went rushing through the house, shutting windows and doors at a furious rate.

Somehow or other, he never once remembered to look in the bathroom, where he had been working

with his negatives at the time the whirr of the telephone bell had brought him downstairs, three steps at a time, in his usual impetuous fashion. And as it turned out, that little omission was fated to cause him more than a few uneasy minutes, before a great while. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, they tell us; and while Steve did attend to *nine* things connected with leaving the house to look after itself until his folks returned, he neglected the *tenth*.

On the way over to the home of Max Hastings he stopped in at a neighbor's and left the front door key. In his great haste Steve could not explain just why he was leaving while the family were away. Doubtless it remained a puzzle with the good lady as to whether Steve, who was known to be rather a headstrong lad, were summoned to where his people were spending a week at the shore; or meant simply to desert his trust, seized with a boyish whim.

But she promised to keep an eye on the house, and see that no one ran away with it during the absence of the family. And she looked after Steve as he ran furiously off, muttering to herself that she hoped the Dowdy boy had not been going with that bad Ted Shafter, who was always getting into trouble through the vicious pranks he played, and that Steve had to leave town so hastily to avoid punishment.

Meantime, Steve, never dreaming as to what fears

his strange actions were arousing in the mind of the neighbor, was making record time toward the home where Max Hastings lived, together with his cousin, Owen, who was an orphan and a book-worm.

The little town of Carson sat upon the bank of the beautiful Evergreen River, in a northern State, not many hundred miles away from one of the great cities.

Among all the boys of the town there were none who were more desirous of having a good time outdoors in the open, than Max and his four chums: his cousin Owen, Steve Dowdy, Toby Jucklin, and Clarence Griffin, the last named being known far and wide as "Bandy-legs" Griffin, on account of his short, and far from straight, underpinning.

In several stories that precede this volume, some of the intensely interesting, and even thrilling incidents that accompanied their search for amusement during the summer months, when school no longer held them to their studies, have been given.

Their initial exploit, and which formed the foundation for many of the outings that followed, had even been written up in the great metropolitan papers, as a sample of boyish enterprise and smartness.

Between them Max and Owen had conceived an idea that since pearls were being found in many of the rivers of Indiana, Arkansas and some other

States of the Middle West, it might pay them to ascend the Evergreen to the point where it was formed by the junction of the two branches, the Big Sunflower and the Elder rivers.

The former stream had long been known to harbor quite a large number of fairly large-sized mussels. With his comrades, Max more than once had gathered some of these shellfish, and cooked them, in much the same fashion as those who live near salt water prepare clams.

They had read up all they could find about the nature and appearance of the valuable mussels, that in some cases yielded pearls worth hundreds of dollars; and so far as they could determine, those along the Big Sunflower, of which the muskrats were so fond, as the empty shells testified, answered the bill.

Accordingly, the five chums set out for a camping trip up the Big Sunflower; and from the commencement of their journey they had met success, as Steve put it, with a big S. From the proceeds of the sale of several of the pearls, negotiated in the city by the father of one of the boys, they realized quite a large sum.

And being boys with red blood in their veins, their first thought had been to invest in motorcycles; which gave them more or less delight, but to the members of their respective families considerable concern.

After Bandy-legs, who never was able fully to

master his machine, had met with several accidents, none of which, however, was serious, the households of the boys got together, and discussed the matter. It ended in an edict that the dangerous motorcycles must go; which they immediately did.

Then the boys made a more modest purchase, and this time it was in the line of canoes, two of the single canvas type now so generally used in Maine and Canada, in place of the old-time birch bark contraption; another tandem or double paddling craft of the same type, which the boys delighted to call their "war canoe"; and a fourth one made of cedar, after the lap-streak pattern, which Bandy-legs insisted upon having, his opinion of the canvas boats being of the negative order.

Possibly the secret fears of the good mothers did not altogether vanish after this change had taken place. It may have seemed like six of one and half a dozen of the other; but nothing was said; and the five chums certainly did have a great time with the little flotilla of canoes when they took their next outing up the Big Sunflower branch of the Evergreen.

Steve possibly was thinking along these lines as he ran in the direction of the Hastings home. His curiosity was wrought up to the highest pitch by the air of mystery in which Max had chosen to envelop his communication.

No doubt there was an expression of great concern upon the face of the Dowdy boy. It aroused

the concentrated curiosity of one of his fellow school-mates, whom he happened to meet on the way; for the other immediately shouted out at him:

"Hey, Steve, what's the matter? Running to a fire?"

"No!" grunted the other, brushing past with scant ceremony.

"Mad dog?" persisted the boy, noting that Steve carried a gun; and at that the runner only looked back with a grin.

"Cop after you?" pursued the other, as if bent on knowing.

"Oh, rats!" called out the disgusted Steve, over his shoulder.

"Hey, got a pain; going after a doctor, Steve?" yelled the other, fully puzzled to know why the runner seemed so serious.

But this time Steve declined to waste any of his precious breath in making answer. He had caught a glimpse of another boy running from a different quarter, and had no difficulty in recognizing his chum, Toby Jucklin, who lived closer to the Hastings home than the Dowdy place happened to be.

Toby had an unfortunate habit of stammering when excited. There were times when he could speak as plainly as any of the other boys; and again he would get so tied up, that in order to bring himself to a proper realization of his nervous condition he had contracted the habit of stopping short, giving a sharp whistle, swallowing hard, as though

he were choking, and then getting his words out calmly.

In the beginning some of the boys had made all manner of fun of Toby, but long familiarity with his affliction had caused them almost to ignore it. And besides, he was slowly overcoming the stuttering habit, so that nowadays he did not halt *quite* so much in his speech as formerly.

Toby lived with a guardian, a Mr. Jackson, who was as kind to him as old Uncle Nathan Jucklin had been cross, up to the time the change had been made in the boy's affairs; when it was found that he really had quite a little fortune left him by his father, to which the close-fisted uncle had been holding fast.

The two boys arrived in front of the Hastings gate about the same time. Panting for breath they looked at each other, as though wild with eagerness. Steve was carrying his gun and several other things; while Toby also seemed to have a hastily tied up bundle under his arm.

"Did he tell you what it was all about?" demanded Steve, as they pushed through the gate, and hurried up the walk toward the house.

Toby only shook his head vigorously in the negative. In his present exhausted condition it would have been an utter impossibility for him to have attempted any sort of speech. And Toby, at least, knew his own weakness, it seemed.

Now they were at the door, which opened before they could try the knob.

"Hello, Owen," burst out Steve, as he clutched hold of the boy who stood there, a fine looking young chap, with a serious face, as became a great reader; "what's it all about? Where are we going? What's happened all of a sudden to start Max off like this? For the love of goodness open up, and tell us *something*. We're just ready to burst, explode, go all to pieces!"

"Well," said Owen, with a smile, "just hold your horses a minute more. Max is in the library, and ready to explain the thing right away, now that we're all here."

"Yep, all but Bandy-legs; it's a shame he ain't in this!" grumbled Steve; and then, as he noticed the singular look Owen gave him, a sudden flash of intelligence crossed his face, causing him to exclaim:

"Great Jupiter, why didn't it strike me before! Look here, Owen, is Bandy-legs the cause of all this hulla-balloo? Are we going up where he's been visiting his old great aunt, Miss Matilda Griffin, twenty miles up the Elder River?"

"Wait, and you'll know all we do, for here's Max, ready to open up."

They had by this time entered the room, the walls of which were almost entirely covered with book-cases, filled with volumes on every known subject; for Mr. Hastings, being a retired business man, with

a love for wide knowledge, kept adding to his really fine library every time he visited the city. And what a feast Owen had during the many happy hours he browsed among those stores of information and romance.

Max, of course, was smiling a little as he saw the red faces of the two chums; but Steve could catch a look of unusual concern on the countenance of the other, who was in reality the acknowledged leader of the five comrades.

"Ran all the way, both of you, I reckon!" Max remarked. "Well, I wanted to get you here just as fast as your legs could carry you; because the little gas-wagon is due in a hurry now; and when it comes we're going to get away on the jump."

"Where to, Max? You promised to tell, you know, when I joined you? Don't you see we're mighty near eaten up with wanting to know?" pleaded Steve.

"D-d-ditto!" stammered Toby, just as anxiously.

"Well, to begin with," said Max, soberly now, "we're going up to the home of Miss Matilda Griffin, Bandy-legs' aunt."

"Why?" snapped Steve, his lips tightening, as though he might be getting himself ready for something in the nature of a shock.

"I had a telegram from her less than an hour ago. She doesn't want his parents to know; but struck the idea of telling his four chums first, to

see what could be done about it. So we're going up there as fast as we can."

"What's happened to our bully chum, Bandy-legs, Max? Has he been taken down sick with typhoid fever, or got the measles; or did he have a tumble, like he does so often, and this time break a leg?" demanded Steve.

"Bandy-legs is lost in the Great Dismal Swamp!" announced Max, in a troubled voice.

CHAPTER II.

A MISSING CHUM.

FOR the space of a few seconds there was absolute silence in the library of the big Hastings home. Steve was so confounded that he gasped for breath, staring at Max; and as for Toby, he seemed utterly helpless.

"Tell me about that!" finally broke out the impetuous Steve. "Bandy-legs lost in that terrible old bog up there! Great Jupiter! Hasn't he heard enough about it to keep away? How did it all happen, Max? Has he been gone long? Do you think he's starved to death by now? Are there any wild critters in that place like panthers or wolves, that would eat our chum? Oh, tell us all you know!"

"Um, um," grunted Toby; which was meant to indicate that he was just as much concerned as Steve, even if he lacked the straight tongue to say so.

Max held up a yellow bit of paper which had lain on the table; and the boys both recognized it as the familiar telegraph message form.

"This is all I know, fellows," he said. "It was brought here less than an hour ago, with an answer

wanted. As soon as I read it I sent back the few words: 'Coming just as quick as I can get the boys together.' Then I called you both up. Listen, and I'll read what the old lady says. I reckon she must have driven over to the nearest railroad telegraph station when she sent this."

"Go on!" cried Steve, plainly tremendously excited by the prospect of their being called upon to find their missing comrade, who, as seemed often to be the case, was in deep trouble again.

"'Clarence lost in swamp; went there yesterday, and has not returned to-day. Fear to let his parents know; mother in delicate health, and shock might injure her. Can you and his other young friends hurry up here to see what can be done? Answer.'"

Max read this slowly, so that its true significance might sink into the minds of his companions. As usual Steve was the mouthpiece of the pair; and Toby seemed only too willing that this should be so. When a fellow has trouble in uttering his meaning as clearly as he would like, it is pleasant to have a chum who is ready to voice his sentiments.

"Will we go? Well, I should say, yes!" exclaimed Steve. "Where's that old buzz wagon you mentioned, Max? Why isn't it waitin' for us? Say, every minute we waste here might mean a whole lot for poor old Bandy-legs. Since yesterday his aunt says, twenty-four whole hours. Whew, that's

a tough deal, all right! And he does love feeding to beat the band. By this time he's a living skeleton, I reckon."

"Oh, not so bad as that!" remarked Owen. "A fellow wouldn't starve in so short a time, you know. He might feel awfully hungry at first; but after that, for some time it would just get to be an empty void sort of condition. That's what people say who've gone through forty days of fasting, living only on cold water."

"I'm not so much concerned about Bandy-legs starving, as some other things that might happen to him," remarked Max, glancing out of the window, as though he imagined he heard a sound like a gasoline car coming along the road.

"Such as wild beasts attacking our chum?" suggested Steve, gripping his gun in a fierce clutch, and looking very resolute; as though he felt that if only he had the chance to get a sight of the said animals they would never bother anyone more.

"Well, even that doesn't make me as uneasy as some other things," Max went on, quickly. "What if the poor chap has broken a leg, somehow? We all know how clumsy he can be sometimes. And while he's escaped any serious hurt up to now, I've been feeling it in my bones lately that something was due Bandy-legs soon."

"It's going to be a big job for you, Max, tryin' to track him in that terrible swamp and cranberry

bog," suddenly remarked Toby, surprising himself no doubt by his fluent speech about as much as he did his friends.

"I only hope it can be done," answered Max, with a long sigh; "and I'm bound to try my level best; you know that without my saying it. But there's yet another possibility that gives me a cold shiver."

"What is it; tell us, Max!" demanded Steve.

"We may never find poor Bandy-legs," the other went on, gravely; "because, they say that there are places in that bog where nobody has ever found bottom. The slimy mud is just like quicksand, and if you once get stuck fast, you can't break away. Inch by inch you feel yourself being pulled down, just like a giant had hold of your feet, till at last the mud closes over your head—and that's all."

"Wow, you do give us the cold creeps, Max!" muttered Steve, turning pale as he listened; "and yet I know that's as true as anything. I heard a man tell once how he got caught fast that way, and came near perishing. His yells were heard by a woodcutter half a mile off, when the wind changed; and that feller managed to get him out by using a log and a rope that he fastened to the limb of a tree overhead. Oh, my! I hope our poor old chum didn't get stuck in that treacherous bog!"

"Here's the gas-wagon!" announced Max, to the great relief of the impatient one.

Picking up what packages they had to carry, the four boys hastened out of the house. There was a

small gasoline machine standing at the door, driven by a pretty powerful motor. Billikin himself acted as pilot and chauffeur. He was a little man, but capable of attending to his business.

Into the vehicle the four piled in a great hurry. It mattered not that with the bundles they were taking along, they filled it to the crowded stage. Boys are willing to endure all sorts of discomforts without a murmur, if the object is fun; and when an emergency like the present one arises, they make light of such a minor matter as sitting upon one another's lap if necessary.

Mr. Billikin was urged to "let her out for all she was worth"; and having left the confines of Carson in the rear, they began to make pretty rapid time. Indeed, the livery stable keeper rejoiced in the chance to ascertain just how fast his new little car could travel along the roads which, at this time of year, were in a good state of repair.

The boys soon had to pull down the peaks of their caps to hold the head gear on, for their swift passage created a terrific wind. But such rapid action was in keeping with the excited state of their aroused feelings; and none of them felt that he begrudged the occasional twinge, as they were bumped by passing over some little hole in the road.

"This—is—goin' some!" gasped Steve; "Touch-and-Go Steve," mind you, who had never before been known to have things move fast enough to suit him.

"I should say, yes," declared Max, out of one side of his mouth, as though he feared that if that wind once found a way to get in it might choke him.

"Wow!" was Toby's way of expressing that his sentiments were along the same lines.

"Must have gone five miles already!" ventured Steve, a little later.

Mr. Billikin glanced down at the little cyclometer.

"Six and a quarter, boys!" he remarked.

"If everything goes on as well as it has up to now, we ought to be there inside of half an hour; and you said noon, Max!" remarked Steve, with a grin.

"I was wrong. Never rode with Mr. Billikin before; and didn't know what great speed he could get out of his new car," Max replied, as they slackened their speed while climbing a steep hill.

"She's something of a climber, too, I notice," Owen observed.

"Go up the side of a house, if pushed," was the rather far-fetched declaration of the new gasoline wagon's owner.

"I was just thinking about Bandy-legs," remarked Steve; "and how he often used to say there was nothing he was so much afraid of as getting lost. If I've heard him tell that once, I did twenty thousand times. He used to shiver every time he pictured himself sitting down there in the woods, tired and hungry, with not a match along to make things seem more cheery; and hearing the wild animals

yowling all around him. And now to think that he's just had to do that very thing!"

Max glanced at the livery man.

"We might as well tell Mr. Billikin about it," he remarked; "he will promise to keep it all a dead secret till we say he can speak about it, won't you, Mr. Billikin?"

"Surely I will," was the hearty reply.

Thereupon Max explained what had happened; and the man was quick to express his sympathy; for he knew Bandy-legs Griffin well, and had the utmost respect for his mother and father.

"That same swamp has got a bad name, if I do say it, owning a little part of the same myself," he remarked. "I've never been through the place, but one look was enough for me. I had a big bill against Sile Benner, a relative of the Shafter family in Carson, and he offered me his holdin' in swamp land to settle. There's a heap of valuable timber in there, that might some time be got out some way, and as the Benners didn't have any other way of settlin', I just closed the deal. That was nigh on four years back; and nothin' has ever been done to cut that timber. P'r'aps there never will be, because few men could be found willing to go into that swamp and work."

"Why, yes," Steve went on to say; "I knew Ted Shafter had an uncle up there, runnin' a sort of bog that had cranberries on it. Some years he makes money, and then again he loses his crop. But I

hate to hear you say such bad things about the Great Dismal Swamp, Mr. Billikin, seein' that our poor chum has gone and lost himself there."

Max had started at hearing what Steve said. A look of intelligence flitted over his face, and then passed away. If he had an inspiration just then, he said nothing to the others about it. Max was not apt to be too sanguine. He waited until he could discover some proof before believing a thing might be true; especially when on the face of it the matter seemed almost incredible.

They had reached the top of the long hill by this time; and as they shot down the other slope like a comet, talking was absolutely impossible. So they could only sit there, gripping each other, or the sides of the motor, and counting the telegraph poles that seemed to fly past in endless procession; for at this point the line connected between two railroads across country.

Steve bent down presently to see what the register told.

"Bully! Eleven miles done, boys!" he managed to cry out; for nothing pleased this nervous boy better than flying through space as though mounted on a meteor.

"We'll soon be up there!" remarked Max, consolingly.

"Looks kind of marshy already!" said Owen, pointing to one side of the road as they clipped along with a whirr.

"Oh, the big swamp looks down this way, all right," observed Mr. Billikin. "It's the largest of its kind in the whole State; and if ever they can drain it, perhaps my holdings will be worth ten times what they cost me. Yes, that's the beginning of the swamp your friend young Griffin is lost in. Wish I could stay up and help you hunt for the poor boy; but I've got to be back this afternoon sure. A plumber is coming to do a heap of work about my house, put in a new bathroom, too."

The boys were all turning to the left to observe the swamp they had now commenced to pass, and no one paid much attention to what the livery man said; though to be sure Max did remark they felt able to do everything that could be done in the search for the missing chum.

"Eighteen miles, boys!" announced Steve, after a little more time had slipped by.

"Do you happen to know where Miss Griffin lives, Mr. Billikin?" asked Max; "because, you see, none of us has ever been up here before. Bandy-legs hated to go all by himself; but his great aunt expects to leave all she has to him some day, and is mighty fond of him; so his folks shoved him off for a week."

"Yes," replied the other, promptly, "I met the old lady, and her queer old man, Black Bob, who's doubled up with rheumatism so that he seems hardly able to hobble around. I'll take you right to her door, and then it's back for me."

Five minutes later, and he pointed ahead.

"Yon's the place, boys, where you see that big clump of trees," he said. "Long ago Miss Griffin used to farm, and owned a cranberry bog, too. That's where old Bob got his rheumatics, I reckon, stayin' out so much in the marsh, a-pickin' berries. But she had a nice little fortune left her, and ever since just takes life easy. Look close, and you'll see her right at this minute, a-standin' there at the gate, wavin' her white handkerchief to you, boys!"

Max felt his heart beating much faster than natural, as he replied to the signal. How he did hope that it meant good news; and that Bandy-legs had turned up, safe and sound, after his aunt had sent her telegram for help.

The little car bore down upon the entrance to the Griffin farm at a hot rate of speed, and presently pulled up in front of the gate. An elderly woman and a bent-over black man stood there, also a small boy.

Max and his three chums jumped pellmell out of the machine that had carried them over those roads in record-breaking time.

"This must be Miss Griffin, Bandy-legs—I mean Clarence's aunt," he said, as he held out his hand. "I am Max Hastings. Tell me, is there anything new?"

And the old lady shook her white-crowned head sadly as she replied:

“No news, my boy; we have heard nothing, seen nothing, from our poor Clarence since he left us about this time yesterday, meaning to be gone only an hour or two. And hope is beginning to turn into despair. Oh! I do wish you could find him!”

CHAPTER III.

BRAVE HEARTS TO THE RESCUE.

"TELL us what you know about it, please, Miss Griffin," said Max, "and then we'll try our level best to find Clarence."

"It is so little, I don't see how it can assist you in any way," she replied, as she tried to compose herself again, after giving way to her feelings in tears. "He told me he thought he would go out and try the fishing old Bob had been speaking about. We have plenty of boats around, you see, because long ago when we ran the cranberry bog it was necessary that the pickers use them to get there through the water of the marsh."

"And he went, with his fishing rod and tackle, that I happen to know he brought up here with him?" Max asked, more to encourage the old lady than anything else.

"Yes, that was it," she replied. "I saw him go away, and he waved his hand and blew me a kiss. Poor, poor boy, to think that I should never see him again."

"But it's too soon to say that, Miss Griffin," Owen interposed. "Here are four stout fellows, eager to

search that Great Dismal Swamp through, from end to end, until they can learn something of Bandy-legs. We can shout, and fire guns, so he's sure to hear us. Don't give way to despair. When we play ball we always say that the game isn't over until the last fellow is out. In that way we keep our pluck up; and sometimes it pays, too."

"But you can tell us where he expected to fish?" asked Max, desirous of learning any possible facts before starting out.

"Bob, here, can tell you," she replied.

"'Deed an' I kin, sah," remarked the bent-over colored man, eagerly; and it was plainly evident that Black Bob thought considerable of the lost boy, and was greatly concerned about his fate. "Yuh jes' goes along de canal we uster tuh foller at de time we gathers de crangberries, till yuh gits to de turn-in' pint. Dar yuh'll see a tree wid three tops like de queerest thing eber. In de open water nigh dat ere tree was whar de fishin' uster be de bestest. An' I done told dat boy tuh make a try dar. Whar he done gwine tuh arter, dat gits me, it suah do."

Bob shook his white woolly old head mournfully, as though he felt it a personal loss.

Max asked more questions.

"Before we plunge into the swamp I'd like first rate to get some sort of idea about how it runs," he remarked. "Do you know anybody who can give me points that way, Bob?"

"I suah does, sah," grinned the other, his eyes sparkling. "Reckons as how dar beant anudder pusson roundabout heah, as knowed ebery crook an' turn in dat same ole swamp as well as I done. Yuh see, sah, heaps o' yeahs ago, long afore I took up wif Miss Matildy heah, I uster poke around in dat same place, settin' traps foh de mushquash, dat dey calls muskrats. Dey ain't rats 'tall; and is jes' de bestest eatin' yuh eber seed."

"Yes, I've heard of that," said Owen, "and read a lot about it."

Max already had his pencil out, and lost no time in asking questions of the old lame ducky. He found Uncle Bob quite intelligent, and able to tell him considerable about the shape and dimensions of the big swamp.

Taking advantage of Miss Griffin's temporary absence, as she hurried into the house to get a big lot of food ready, so that they might carry it with them (for she knew her nephew must be almost starved by this time), Max proceeded to ask the old negro other things, which he would not have liked her to hear.

"Is it possible for a boy to get lost in that place, and never find his way out?" was the first question he put.

"It sartin suah am, foh a fact, sah," came the disquieting reply, as Black Bob scratched his woolly pate, and shook his head mournfully. "Reckon I'se

knowed ob more'n one as never kim outen dar agin. It am a suah enough hoodoo place, dat ere swamp am."

"And we have been told that there are lots of places where, if a fellow happens to get caught in the slimy mud, he'll never be able to pull himself out again; and unless help comes, may perish; is that so, Bob?"

"I've been ketched dat aways mawself more'n a few times, sah; uster kerry a rope round my waist, like dat; an' if eber I felt mawself a-sinkin' in de mud, neber got excited like, 'case dat'd only push yuh funder in; but I'd throw de rope up ober de branch ob a tree, an' in dat way pull maw feet loose. Yah! yah! it am hard to git a swamp trapper ketched in de mud, sah."

"I hope you told our chum about that, Bob, and that he'd have a rope along with him," Max went on. "But whatever could have tempted him to leave that open water, and paddle into the gloomy old swamp?"

Black Bob shook his head.

"Neber knows wat boys dey kin t'ink ob doin', dat's right," he remarked. "Reckon now, if so be dere happened tuh be a 'coon run erlong a log, an' dat boy seed de same, he done forgot all I told him 'bout neber gwine in dar, but jest up wid de anchor, an' paddle, paddle arter dat 'coon to see wha' he gwine."

"Here comes Miss Matilda again, and loaded down with bundles," remarked Steve. "Looks like it might all be something to eat, too. Say, she knows our chum, Bandy-legs, all right, and that he's got a husky appetite. But then there are four of us here, and we've got to eat some, too, I reckon."

"Bob, can you get us a couple of lanterns, and a bottle of oil to carry along? A box of matches, too, don't forget," Max remarked.

"Yas, sah, suah I kin," the other answered heartily; "an' I wanter say dat it nigh breaks my heart, it do, dat dis pesky rheumatiz keeps me from gwine 'long wid you boys. Nebber uster think a thing 'bout stayin' days in dat swamp. Knows de trails like I does my own name, yas, sah. Willin' tuh do anythin' dat I kin tuh help yuh find dat boy. Missy Matildy, she takes a heap o' stock by him, so she do."

Max did not wish to lose more time than was necessary. He knew of nothing else that could be done at the farm. Mr. Billikin had long since started back home, and bound again by a sacred promise not to mention a word about anybody being lost in the terrible Great Dismal Swamp.

Upon inspecting the boats Max found two that seemed to answer their purpose, although they were pretty old, and liable to spring a leak if roughly used.

Into these they piled all the stuff that they were

likely to need while on their hunt for the missing comrade. Miss Griffin hovered around all the time, and from the eager look on her wrinkled face it was plain to be seen that once more dying hope had sprung into new life, since the coming of these energetic boys on the scene.

Already had Max decided about how they should conduct the hunt. He and Steve would occupy one boat, while Owen and Toby took the other. Each party was provided with a gun and a lantern, the other things being also equally divided. This was a wise provision; for one of them might happen to run across the absent lad, and be in sore need of refreshment, which without this precaution might all be in the other boat.

It was nearly noon by this time. Miss Griffin had hurried to the house again, and reappeared bearing another package.

"This is some lunch for you, boys," she explained. "You will be hungry before you get fairly started. I haven't had a boy of my own, but I know something about them. And eating constitutes a big part of the affairs of life with most of them. They have to eat plenty when they're growing so fast, and so full of life. Clarence was never still a minute, but so full of vim and vigor. Poor, poor boy; I hope and pray he may be spared; for his mother's sake, if not his own."

They parted from the old lady and her crippled

manservant. There was no cheer given to signalize the start on this expedition, such as usually marked their outing trips.

Even impetuous Steve, nearly always ready to burst into song or merriment of some kind, seemed strangely quiet. What he had seen of that terribly big swamp as they came along, and heard concerning its horrors, depressed his spirits. The very thought of their chum, Bandy-legs, being lost in that place was enough to discourage merriment.

If it had been Max now, they might not have done so much worrying, since he had always been accustomed to looking out for himself, and knew so many things connected with the wilderness; but Bandy-legs was next door to a "tenderfoot" when it came to practical things in the woods; and might go hungry when a dozen sources of food supply were actually within hand's reach, simply because of ignorance.

"That Billikin is a pretty decent sort of a fellow, after all," remarked Max, after they had been paddling along for a little while, following the plainly marked route, where poles had been thrust into the mud under the water.

"That's right," added Owen. "He was real provoked that he had to go back in such a hurry, when he wanted to stay with us the worst way. What was it he said about having the plumber at his house, putting in a new bath, or something like that?"

“Bath!”

Steve half sprung to his feet as he almost shouted that word; then he dropped back upon the thwart again, and his face had a blank look that astonished the others not a little.

“Why, hello; what ails Steve?” remarked Max.

“W-w-when he h-h-heard you s-s-say *bath* he j-j-just g-g-got a shock!” declared Toby Jucklin, himself just as curious as either of the others to know what could have affected Steve so strangely.

“Guess anybody’d get a cold chill, when it burst on him like that!” declared the one they were discussing, and speaking almost savagely.

“What’s gone wrong, Steve?” asked Max, pleasantly.

“I’m blessed if I can remember, that’s what,” muttered the other; who looked as if he were trying to think harder than ever before in his life, if the lines that appeared around his half-shut eyes stood for anything at all.

“Remember about what?” Max continued, bent on getting at the secret of these sudden queer actions on the part of Steve.

“Hang the luck if I believe I did shut it off!” Steve declared, smiting the palm of one hand with his other, clenched in a fist. “Glory be! Just to think of what a howling mess there’ll be if I stay away several days, and she keeps on a-running all that blessed time. Oh, gracious! I feel weak just thinking about it, and that’s a fact!”

"Shut what off?" asked Owen; though Max began to see something like light; for he suddenly remembered certain things Steve had spoken about at the time he was talking over the wire and afterwards.

"That cold-water faucet in our bath tub at home," came the dejected reply. "For the life of me I just can't remember for sure whether I did stop the water, before running down to answer the telephone bell, or not. One minute I seem to remember doing it all right, and the next I'm that scared I didn't that I feel a chill chasing up and down my back."

"But somebody would hear it running, and go in the bathroom to stop it," said Toby, once more speaking splendidly.

"That's the trouble," groaned poor Steve; "nobody home, and won't be till the end of the week. Gee! if that water keeps on running there won't be a thing left of the house by then. I bet you the walls crumble and fall in. Day and night that old faucet will keep on flowing, flowing till first the ceilings crack and tumble; then, as it gets deeper in the rooms below, the walls will soak, and give way. Oh, just think what a grand surprise my folks will get when they come home!"

"Perhaps you'd better turn back, then, and find some way of getting home," suggested Owen, feeling for his chum in this new trouble.

"It would take me hours to get there, and the

mischievous would all be done long before then," declared Steve. "Besides, what if I had turned the water off, say, p'r'aps there wouldn't be a mad feller around Carson then. I *must* have done it; nobody but a silly fool would answer a phone bell and let the water run in the bath tub. And, yet, sometimes I have been just as silly, I admit. But there's no use talking, boys, I ain't going to turn back now, whether the Dowdy mansion floats away or not. Our chum has got to be found, and I'm in the hunt for keeps. You hear me warble."

In spite of his brave words, however, Steve was fated to experience many a painful twinge in time to come, as he tried to wrestle with that puzzle, and remember whether he had or he had not turned the water off before leaving the bathroom.

It would arise like a ghost to haunt him in his wakeful moments in the night; and pursue him even while the sun was shining brightly in the daytime. Nor could there be any way of settling the matter until their mission up here to the Great Dismal Swamp had been completed, no matter how it turned out, and their faces were once more turned toward Carson and home.

By now they had reached the place where, as Black Bob had indicated, the best fishing was to be found. The tree he mentioned was plainly seen; but though they looked in every quarter not the first glimpse of anything resembling a boat was sighted.

"It's going to be rather a blind trail, I'm afraid," Max remarked, as they once more started to move ahead.

None of the others had any suggestion to make. They depended considerably on the sagacity and knowledge of woodcraft possessed by Max to assist them along in the search. Toby was using the push pole in one boat; while Steve, in the stern of the other, kept urging the craft on to greater speed. Steve did everything in the greatest hurry imaginable. Several times Max glanced up from the rude map he was studying to see what the sudden spurt meant; and even warned the boatman once that he might get himself in trouble, with the pole sticking fast in the soft mud, so that he could not withdraw it.

They were following what would seem to be the most natural channel anyone would be apt to take when wandering into the swamp for the first time; indeed, outside of this route it was impossible to penetrate very far in any direction, so Old Black Bob had declared when giving Max information upon which to shape his chart.

This being the case, there seemed no danger that they might go far astray in the beginning of the hunt. A little later, when the numerous side branches ran hither and thither from the main stem, their troubles would begin. And it was at that time Max wanted to know by heart the possibilities

of every avenue he had marked so rudely on the paper.

If it had all been only a boat trip, possibly the aged and bent-over darky might have accompanied them, in spite of his aches and pains; but he had told them there might be a good chance that the one they sought had lost his boat, and was wandering around in the depths of the half-submerged swamp, so that they would sooner or later find themselves compelled to do likewise.

Max, feeling somewhat hungry himself, was just thinking that they might presently come to a stop, and discuss ways and means in common, while they ate some of the lunch the old lady had so gladly put up for their immediate consumption.

Indeed, he had just turned, after laying his map aside, and was about to say as much to Steve, when a sudden tremendous lurch of the boat nearly threw him off the narrow thwart he had been occupying near the bow.

He was just in time to see Steve lose his footing on the stern of the boat, made flat for punting purposes, and be dragged over by the pole, which he had thrust so deeply in the mud that all his energies failed to remove it; and the boat moving swiftly onward at the same time, the boy followed his obstinate pole overboard.

When Max looked up, after recovering himself, it was to see Steve dangling there, very much after

the style of one of those painted monkeys on a stick, which have amused children for years and years; for in his desperation Steve had clasped his agile legs about the pole, and was trying to keep from dropping into the water.

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CHAPTER IV.

PLUNGING INTO THE SWAMP.

"L-L-LOOK at S-s-steve!" yelled Toby; and then came very near following the example set by his pole-mate; for he had to tug desperately before he could succeed in wrenching his pusher free, so sticky was the deep mud at that particular point.

It certainly looked as though Steve might be in for a ducking, because he was wriggling there like a "speared eel," Owen called it, getting very red in the face with his exertions; and all the while the pole was slowly but surely lowering him closer to the water beneath.

Max hastened to snatch up one of the paddles and try to stop the progress of the boat, which was rapidly leaving the pole-handler in the lurch.

And Toby, recovering himself, also set to work in the endeavor to change the set course of the second craft, so as to run in close to the boy who dangled there.

That was one picture which Steve would never be called on to develop; though Owen did snatch up the little kodak and snap off a couple of shots at him. But he would have to guard them care-

fully, lest the hero of the adventure take chances of destroying the film, so as to conceal the laughable nature of his predicament.

Luckily the pole sunk in the mud seemed capable of holding until the second of the boats came close enough for Steve to be hauled aboard. Max never was able to understand how it happened; but when they were all later on forced to lend a hand in the effort to dislodge the obstinate pole he realized how deep down it had been driven.

Steve was so badly winded after his contortions in midair that Max "relieved" him for a while, to let him rest up a bit. It was not unpleasant work, if one but took things easy; but whoever knew impatient Steve to do that? None of his companions, for a certainty.

Max said not a single word of reproach, but Steve evidently felt more or less ashamed of the mess he had made of things.

"Don't know what's the matter with me to-day, for sure," he remarked a little later, when applying once more for his old job in the stern, with the pole to wield; "everything I do seems to go crooked. Must be something in the air that rattles me. Gee! wouldn't I give something right now if I could only remember whether I *did* turn that blessed old water off!"

Max could give a pretty good guess, if he had been asked, but as he was not he wisely kept still. He knew only too well that it was Steve's way to

do everything just as though the house were on fire. No doubt, when he hurried away from home, just a couple of hours before, after getting that imperative summons, he did not think of going down into the cellar to see whether the door were secured; or look to ascertain if the scuttle in the roof had been closed. And to think of his not even remembering to glance in the bathroom, where he had been at work! Doubtless his prints were still there, and would possibly be absolutely ruined before he saw them again—if nothing worse happened.

But that was Steve Dowdy all over. Max always said he “flew off the handle” at the least provocation. Whether that old saying applies to an ax wielded by a stalwart woodsman in felling a tree, or a human being, it spells danger nearly always.

As they moved along, Max was trying to arrange a certain code of signals, so that should those in the two boats be compelled to separate, as he supposed would be the case before long, they might have a means of communication in case the lost were discovered, or anything turned up that seemed to merit a coming together for an exchange of views.

This could always be done by means of the two guns. A single shot followed by a brief silence, and then a second shot would mean that a clew had been discovered, and in such a case the other boat would better try to find the one from which the signal had been given.

Still a third shot, fired in the same way, would

mean bad news, and that poor Bandy-legs had been found, but not alive. They all hoped when this was explained to them that the three slow shots might never be used.

On the other hand, three quick discharges would tell the joyful news that the boy lost in the deep mazes of the Dismal Swamp had been found, and that he was at least in a fair state of health, even if ravenous with hunger.

It would not be wise for the boats to get too far away from each other. And in order to prevent this Max arranged that they should from time to time give a certain "hallo!" that could be heard a long way off in that still place. Such a cry, it was intended, would stand for steadiness, and to indicate that they were keeping each other within touch.

"It's certainly getting to look pretty fierce in here," remarked Steve some ten minutes later, as he glanced around at the trees by which they were surrounded, most of which had creepers hanging from their limbs, and were so matted above that comparatively little of sunlight managed to force a way underneath the queer green canopy.

There was the channel they had been following; and besides water in patches appeared to be scattered all around, but there was dry land, too; and in other places lay what appeared to be beds of ooze, partly covered with moss or other vegetation, and extremely deceptive.

These were the particular places that made the boys shudder when they saw them; for only too well did they know that it was with reference to just such sink holes old Black Bob had spoken, when he mentioned the fact of his getting bogged many a time, when, only for the knowledge he possessed, and the handy rope he always carried about his waist, his life might have paid the forfeit for his carelessness.

If an experienced swamp "mushquash" hunter and trapper could be deceived so often by these deceptive quagmires, what of a greenhorn like Bandy-legs? So they thought a good many shivery things as they glanced toward one of these mud holes, but did not have the nerve to exchange opinions. Each fellow was earnestly saying to himself it might not be so, and that Bandy-legs would be too wise to trust himself on such insecure footing.

At the same time they were afraid.

They had divided up the lunch, and were munching it contentedly as they made constant progress. Steve and Toby declined to rest, and managed to take an occasional bite as they continued to wield their push-poles.

"There's one of the side channels he spoke about," said Steve, pointing with his pole.

"Yes, I've marked two other smaller ones we passed," replied Max, quietly. "And I think it's about time we separated. Pull in, and let's take a

look to see whether he could have turned in here and left a sign behind."

"Never by design, for Bandy-legs isn't built that way; you mean some mark he left without meaning to do it?" declared Owen.

"W-w-well, I declare!" exclaimed Toby, showing the greatest astonishment. "D'ye h-h-hear that, S-s-steve; he can find a trail on w-w-water just like on l-l-land! Will w-w-wonders ever stop?"

"Oh, I didn't say I'd sure do it," remarked Max, shaking his head. "I only advanced the idea that if he *did* turn in here he might have left some mark to show it. Perhaps not every fellow would find it, even if he did; but an experienced woodsman would look for it, anyhow. Let's see; shove me in closer to the turning point, Steve, where the side channel breaks away."

He soon caught hold of the overhanging bushes, and began to examine them foot by foot, as he dragged himself along by their help. The others watched his actions in silence, as though eager to ascertain the result of his labors.

Max quickly looked up.

"See here," he said, "there something scraped against this little branch, and inside of twenty-four hours, I do believe. It's nearly broken off, as if a boat, turning in here, had caught it; but you can see that the leaves are only wilted, not dead. Honestly, fellows, it looks to me as if a boat had come around this point, and started into this smaller

channel. Perhaps it was Bandy-legs; perhaps some one else that we don't care about. Owen, I'll match you to see which one takes up here, while the other goes on."

"All right, here goes," answered his cousin, as he took out a coin and gently tossed it up a foot or so in the air.

"Tails!" said Max, quickly.

"You lose, because it's heads; and that means Toby and myself will make a try up this way," Owen announced.

"But what would Bandy-legs ever go up here for; and why do you reckon he ever entered the swamp at all, after being warned against it by his aunt and Black Bob?" Steve propounded before the boats separated.

"That's the mystery," replied Owen.

"Yes," Max went on; "but after we find him and ask a few questions, it may seem mighty simple. Perhaps he saw something that he thought he could capture. And perhaps he caught one of the big fish they tell about up here that towed him off, and Bandy-legs wouldn't know enough to cut the line."

"G-g-goodness g-g-gracious! but you d-d-don't take much s-s-stock in that idea yourself, you k-k-know you d-d-don't, Max?" objected Toby, vigorously.

"Well, to be honest with you, Toby, I don't. I just mentioned it to show how many things *could* happen to coax even a timid fellow like our chum to

forget all the warnings in the wide world and rush into danger. But we'll drop into the next side channel on this side we strike. You know, fellows, Bob said they connected by a whole network of little canals after a bit; so we can get from one to another if we send out a signal. But be careful, Owen. It's enough to have Bandy-legs lost without two more in the same boat."

"W-w-well, if it *should* h-h-happen, we're b-b-better off'n he was; 'cause you see, we've g-g-got a h-h-heap of g-g-grub aboard, and two d-d-days'd be like a bully old p-p-picnic to us."

After seeing the other boat vanish around the first bend, Max began to use the paddle again. He also set Steve to work with the second one; for with deeper water they could really make better progress this way than by poling.

Just as he expected, they soon reached another arm of the channel that ran off in the same direction as that one which the other boys had started up.

"We'll turn in here, Steve," remarked Max; and as they passed around the point he looked sharply to see if there were any recent signs manifest there; but with not the slightest success.

"This isn't such bad going," Steve remarked, after they had been moving smooth along for some little time."

"The old tub of a boat paddles better than I thought it would," Max replied. "It was made to be used with a push-pole or a paddle, and not to

row. You see, there isn't a sign of rowlocks about the sides."

"Well, now, you're about right there, Max," agreed Steve. "And I reckon that if a fellow could see back to all that this monitor has been through he might get on the track of some lively times. What're you going to do now?"

He asked this question because he saw his companion place both hands up to his mouth, fashioned to resemble a megaphone as much as possible.

"Give a toot, and see if the others are within hearing distance," answered Max.

When he had shouted a couple of times, sending the sound toward the proper direction, there came back a plain halloo.

"Great!" exclaimed Steve. "They ain't far away after all; and I suppose we're just keeping on a line with each other all the while."

"That's the idea," was what Max said in reply. "Old Black Bob told me we'd find it that way. And after a little we can get together again; for the passages merge into one wide spread of water with patches of land.

They worked for a short time in silence. Then Steve, who had been thinking of various things, as he tried to keep his mind from grappling with the *one* puzzle that had him in its grip, broke out with:

"Sometimes things happen mighty queer; now, don't they?"

"Well, yes; I guess I can say the same," replied

Max; "because I've had a lot of strange things come to me at times. But what's bothering you now, Steve?"

"Oh, nothing's bothering me; but I just couldn't help thinking what a queer old coincidence—reckon that's the only word that would cover the bill—it was that brought Amiel Toots up here at the same time we were called in such a big hurry."

Max started up.

"What's that you're saying, Steve?" he demanded. "Amiel Toots, one of Ted Shafter's cronies, up here? How d'ye happen to know that?"

"Why, I saw him peekin' out from behind that shed when we passed the crossroads tavern, about half a mile from Miss Griffin's place. Reckon Amiel didn't want us to see him by the way he acted. He knows we've got a crow to pick with him on account of somebody tryin' to bore holes in our canoes. He ducked all right when he saw me looking straight at him. Why, I never thought to say anything about it. Fact is, Max, I thought you'd seen him, too. Amiel's a little coward, you know, and is always skulking around, spying out things for Ted."

Steve rattled on in this style for a short time longer. Then, noticing that his chum was making no reply, he glanced up. Something he saw in the face of the other rather startled him.

"What is it, Max?" he exclaimed, with rising in-

terest. "Why do you smile that way, and look as if you'd found another big pearl? Reckon now, you must have struck a clew somewhere?"

"Perhaps I have!" replied the other, slowly and impressively.

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING THEORY.

"THEN dollars to cents Ted Shafter's in it!" declared Steve, as a great light gradually began to break in upon him.

"Well, let's put things together and see how they stand," Max went on. "I was told that Ted had an old uncle living up here, somewhere along the Elder branch of our Evergreen River about where it comes out of the Dismal Swamp."

"And that's no lie, either; because I've heard him talk about his Uncle Benners heaps of times," Steve went on to say, so as to settle that question.

"Then, if Amiel is up here, we can just about make up our minds Ted Shafter is, too; and where those chaps are found you can always look for Shack Beggs. Don't you see, Steve, that it begins to look *queer*?"

"I should say, yes," burst out the other, with his usual rapidity of forming opinions. "We thought before it was just a calamity; now I declare if it ain't beginnin' to look like a regular old conspiracy!"

"Well," Max went on to remark, "we haven't a shred of evidence to hang that on, *yet*; but we're going to find it before long, if there's any truth in the idea. It only came to me when you said Amiel was up here, and that he tried to dodge out of sight when he saw us coming. That looks a little suspicious, anyway."

"I should say it did," pursued Steve, with set teeth and flashing eyes. "But see here, Max, d'ye think these fellers'd have the nerve to kidnap our chum, and keep him hid away for a spell, just to bother us all? Why, his folks might get after 'em with a hot stick, and have the whole bunch shut up in jail."

"Make up your mind, Steve, that if Ted and his crowd did try anything like that they'd be sure to cover their tracks, so as to blind everybody to the fact that they'd had a hand in the game. He's a cunning snake in the grass, as we ought to know, if anybody does. Just remember what he's tried to do to us in the past; and generally in a sneaking, underhanded way. Ted Shafter couldn't be open and above board if he tried."

"Whew, but you've given me lots to think over, Max!" declared Steve. "But for the life of me I can't just get it through my noggin how Ted and his crowd could bother poor Bandy-legs without his knowing it."

"And I can only give a guess," was the reply Max made. "But plenty of chances to put him in a hole

might happen, when fellows like that are hanging around looking for 'em. Suppose, now, Bandy-legs chased in here after a swimming deer, or anything else that might have attracted his attention, and made him forget all about being warned to keep out. If he landed to look around, how easy for them to sneak up and get away with his boat. He'd never know but what it drifted off. And as Bandy-legs is such a poor specimen of a scout, the chances are the more he tried to get out of the swamp the deeper he'd go into it."

"Whew!" said Steve again; "you do see through these things to beat the band, Max. And after you up and explain, it looks so clear to me, I'm wondering why I never thought of it myself. If that bad lot is around here, ten to one they've had some sort of a hand in getting our bully old chum lost in Dismal Swamp!"

"Well, here's where the passage widens, you see, just as Black Bob said; and I think, Steve, it might be a good thing for all of us to get together again. Four heads ought to be better than two. Perhaps Owen or Toby might have a bright idea that would put us on the right track."

He began to turn the moving boat to one side as they continued paddling. Then, a few minutes later, he sent out another shout. This was answered, and from a point much closer than before, showing that the supposition of Max must be founded on sound principles.

"Hello, Owen!" shouted Max again.

"What is it?" came the distinct reply.

"Work over this way. Want to talk to you about something!" whooped Max.

"All right. Coming!" was wafted back, as clearly as though the speaker were only around back of the little clump of trees that stood in the water a hundred feet ahead, so plainly are sounds transmitted across the water.

Shortly afterwards Steve declared he could hear the other two talking, and then he announced that he had had a glimpse of a moving object. A hail from Max brought a speedy reply. Three minutes later the two boats came together.

Owen and Toby looked eagerly at the others. They were evidently laboring under some new excitement. From the tone of the words Max had used it was evident to them that he had some discovery to communicate.

"Have you struck any trail?" asked Owen, eagerly.

"Nothing," replied Max, "since seeing that broken branch; and, of course, it's only guesswork on our part to figure out that Bandy-legs did that in making a short turn, as he chased around the mouth of that passage after something. But we've got an idea we can see a little light."

"Then give us a look in, please; because we're up against a blank wall," Owen frankly admitted; while Toby nodded, as though seconding the motion.

"Why, Steve here made a little discovery and happened to mention it to me," Max went on to say. "He didn't think it meant anything; but as soon as I heard about it I began to smell a rat. You know Ted Shafter has got an uncle up in this region?"

"Sure we do," remarked Toby, clearly and distinctly, as though he had quite forgotten to stammer for the moment.

"Well," said Max, "Steve saw Amiel Toots dodging behind a barn or woodshed at that crossroads tavern we passed just before we drew up at Bandy-legs' aunt's place!"

"Amiel Toots!" echoed Owen, a look of intelligence flashing athwart his face.

"Yes, and he wouldn't be away up here unless Ted was along; and where those two good-for-nothings are found, you can always put your finger on Shack Beggs. See now what I'm hinting at, don't you?" and Max looked expectantly at the other couple.

"Honest, now, I believe you two have struck oil!" declared Owen, with emphasis.

"W-w-wouldn't p-p-put anything p-p-past 'em!" echoed Toby, falling back again into his old rut.

"It looks bad, I must say," Owen went on. "We happen to know that Ted wouldn't hold back one little minute if he thought he could give any of us a knock. And if he is around this territory the chances are ten to one he's had some sort of a hand in the disappearance of our chum."

"He ought to be locked up for keeps!" grumbled Steve.

"Make your mind easy, he will be some fine day," remarked Max. "Those fellows are bound to go from bad to worse until they set fire to some farmer's barn and get caught in the act. Then all the political influence of Ted's father won't save him from the Reform School. But the trouble is this happens to be only a guess on our part. So far we haven't struck even a teeny little bit of evidence going to prove it. And we don't know yet whether our pard is wandering about in this swamp right now or lying in the barn of Ted's uncle, kept a prisoner just for a lark."

"That's so," remarked Steve, moodily.

"B-b-but you just b-b-bet we *will* k-k-know, and that r-r-right soon!" burst out Toby, angrily.

"We've got to comb this same old swamp from end to end, no matter how long it takes," was the ultimatum of Max.

"And if Bandy-legs is alive, and anywhere around, we'll get an answer from him sooner or later," Owen pursued, in his quiet but convincing way.

"Not many people ever come in here, they say?" Steve ventured.

"Not that you could notice," Max admitted. "I asked Bob, and he said that there were a few who set traps for muskrats and mink and otter in the season; but save for an occasional hunter the swamp was avoided. Too many people have been lost in

it, and come near dying, to make it a safe place for boys to roam around as a general thing. But several times now it has been known that tramps had a shack somewhere back here. They must have been the bank-robbing kind of hoboes known as yeggmen, for they wanted to keep shy of the police, Bob said."

"Did he have any idea there were any of that kind around here right now; because that might explain some things that we don't see clear?" Steve asked.

"Bob didn't know," was the answer Max made; "but then he admitted that since his rheumatiz had crippled him so he hadn't paid much attention to anything connected with the swamp. Miss Griffin has disposed of her cranberry marsh, you know, and he doesn't have to come over here for anything any more. There might be a bunch of those tough characters hiding out here, and again there might not."

"Which way had we better go from here?" asked Owen.

"We ought to make along deeper into the swamp, and clear up this end of the old quagmire before we change around," Max answered.

Accordingly the two boats separated a little, and the boys started to use poles or paddles, according to how the depth of water lay. When it grew deep they took to the latter, as progress was easier that way; but when it shoaled again, there was nothing equal to the long push-pole.

Steve, however, was more cautious now. Once hanging out on that lone pole was apparently quite

enough for him; and he did not want to repeat the experience, no matter what enjoyment his comrades might secure from the spectacle.

They had been proceeding in this manner only a short distance when Toby startled his companions by a sudden exclamation, and giving them to understand by his actions that he had discovered something.

“B-b-b-b—oh, hang it all, say it for me, somebody!” he ejaculated.

“It’s a boat, all right,” added Max, “and the honor of the first discovery belongs to Toby, even if he couldn’t tell us all he wanted. Let’s head that way, and perhaps we’ll find out something of importance. But go slow, for how do we know but what it may belong to some of those same hoboes Bob was telling about, who’ll be apt to give us a warmer reception than we want!”

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT THE TRACKS TOLD.

WARNED by these words from Max, the paddlers approached carefully. So far as they could see nothing appeared to be moving in the near vicinity of where the strange boat was carelessly drawn up on the shore. Still, this was not positive proof that danger in some shape might not lurk around in that section.

Steve managed to draw the gun that was in their craft a little closer to him, as though he wanted to make sure of being in a position to show his teeth should several ugly and rough-looking tramps suddenly make their appearance and demand a surrender on the part of the boys.

But nothing of the kind came to pass. When the prows of the two boats grated upon the roots that held the hard mud in place only a curious squirrel frisked off into the brush near by. It may have been investigating the stranded boat in the hope of finding something in it worth while eating.

The four boys jumped ashore, but they made sure to carry the guns; and as Max took possession of his weapon, Steve, who had loaned his to the other

couple, armed himself with the hatchet, which he gripped in a determined manner.

"Seems to be peaceful like around here," he remarked, when fierce-looking hoboes failed to show up to dispute their landing.

Max held up his hand to restrain the eagerness of his chums.

"Wait up a bit, fellows," he said. "There may be tracks around here, you know, that would tell us lots; and we don't want to cover them up right in the start."

"That's right, boys," remarked Steve. "Give our trailer a chance to get his peepers on 'em, and then we'll hear something drop. Say, there *are* tracks, and heaps of 'em, Max. More'n one feller has been here, I'm telling you."

"Yes, I've seen that already, Steve; and something more. Our chum was here!" was the announcement Max made that thrilled the other three boys.

"You know the mark of his shoes; don't you, Max?" cried out Steve. "Sure, I've seen you examining mine, and laughed to think that if I ever played a trick on you it'd be all day with me, because you'd just have to take one look at my spoor, and know who did the job; unless I was smart enough to change shoes with somebody else. But Bandy-legs has got on his broad-toed shoes, I can see from here. He likes to call 'em his hunting boots, because they come high and lace up halfway to his knees."

But Max was not idle while Steve vented his opinion after this manner. Down on his hands and knees he went, and began to examine the tracks he found there. And fully confident in the ability of their companion to decipher the secret that lay back of those footprints, the other boys waited impatiently for his report.

In a few minutes Max had moved around and covered considerable ground. Then he arose, and his chums clustered around him immediately.

"Got it, have you, Max?" asked Steve.

"Bandy-legs has been here!" said the other, positively.

"Hurrah! That's the first real proof we've run across that he did come into the old swamp. And I take it, then, that this must be his boat!" Owen remarked, exultantly.

"Oh, I knew that almost as soon as I could see it at close quarters," announced Max, coolly. "I had old Black Bob describe the boat he took away, so I'd likely recognize it if ever we came across one floating about in the swamp waters. You see it's got a piece knocked out of the port side; I knew about that as well as some other things I find here, all right."

"Huh!" exclaimed Steve, "looks like an old healer had got mad and chawed a bite right out of the planks; but, of course, they don't have such critters away up here, so it must have been in a smash-

up some time or other. Go on, Max; sounds mighty interestin', I'm telling you."

"There are the prints of three other pairs of shoes here," continued Max.

"Three! Whoop! and that stands for Ted, Shack, and Amiel, as sure as you're born!" Steve burst out with.

"I ought to know the style of track they leave behind them," Max continued; "for I've made it a point to notice such things. Never knew when it might pay me to be able to tell who'd been doing us a mean trick. Yes, the gang was here, and no doubt about it."

"They had our chum held a prisoner, hang 'em for a pack of cowards," grated the indignant Steve. "Three to one, and him a tenderfoot, too. If it had been *me*, now, it mightn't have looked so bad; because I'd fight at the drop of the hat, no matter how it wound up. But Bandy-legs is a sorter peaceful chap, you know. He'd rather run than get in a muss with that crowd."

"Well, that's just what I think he did," remarked Max, quietly.

"Gee, whiz! how c'n you tell that?" demanded Steve.

"There's one queer thing about all these tracks, boys, that I want you to notice," Max went on to say, pointing down at the ground. "Here and there you can see the print of Bandy-legs' shoe all by

itself. Lots of times you'll find one of the others partly blotting his mark out. But you'll not find a single case where Bandy-legs stepped on the print of any of their shoes! Catch on?"

"That seems to say that he was here before they landed," observed Owen, and as if to back his words up Toby nodded his head violently.

"Oh, if that's so, Max," put in Steve, apparently disappointed, "why, they didn't have our chum a prisoner at all, did they?"

"Not right here," came the reply. "Of course, we don't know what happened afterwards. Ted has been in this swamp before, plenty of times, I guess; and might know how to go, so as to cut off Bandy-legs' flight. You see, they didn't follow him far, because here they turned back again. Like as not they just whooped after him, and scared the poor fellow half to death with thinking he was pursued."

"But, Max, they must have had a boat to come here in?" remarked Owen.

"Well, I'd like to see anybody get very far around in this swamp without that useful article," replied Max. "Though from here on there may be more or less land, and a smart native could pick his way. They came in a boat, all right; because, if you look right here, you can see where it ran up on the shore, and how they jumped out."

"Nothing could be plainer," announced Owen,

after they had all taken a look at the marks which the quick eyes of Max had discovered some time before.

"Then, after they chased our chum deeper in the blooming old swamp, Ted and his crowd got in their boat and paddled off again, did they?" asked Steve.

"That's what they did," answered Max; "but whether they just went home, or took a cut-off Ted knew about, so as to head Bandy-legs in his way through that tough-looking place over there, we don't know."

"B-b-but why wouldn't B-b-bandy come b-b-back when they were g-g-gone?" Toby up and asked.

"Just what was on my mind," added Owen.

"That's where we've got to make a guess of it again," Max replied. "First, we all of us know what a blunderer Bandy-legs is, as a rule. And if he was really and truly frightened by what they called out when they were paddling after him, so as to just make him go ashore, he'd keep on running and wading till he thought he'd put a whole lot of distance between himself and Ted's lot. And, boys, it would take a far better woodsman than our poor chum will ever be to find his way back to where he left his boat, once he lost his bearings!"

The others exchanged serious looks at this statement, for they knew deep down in their hearts that it must be true.

"Why, don't I know what a greenhorn always does when he finds himself lost?" declared Steve,

with a gloomy shake of his head. "He thinks he knows where he's heading for; but every time he keeps bearing away to the *left*. Why is that so, Max?"

"Well, lots of people have tried to figure it out, and they seem to believe it comes from our right side being stronger than the left, because we use it more. But, then, when left-handed people are lost, it strikes me they act in just the same way. So what are you going to believe? I only know that it's so. And if anybody realizes that they're lost on the prairie or in a big woods, they must fight constantly against that failing. Best way is to lay out a line straight on, by using trees or something as guide posts, and keep pushing it ahead as you go. But, fellows, Bandy-legs didn't know enough to do that."

"That's what!" declared Steve. "He was a greenhorn, all right. And for the longest time he's been wondering what would happen to him if ever he should be so unlucky as to get lost. He knows now!"

"Don't you think, Max," said Owen, "that Ted knew he couldn't ever find his way back here again?"

"I'm dead sure of it," answered the one addressed, "and I'll tell you why I think so. They would never have left his boat ashore here if they dreamed he could get back again. It would be so easy to give it a push, and let the wind blow it away into some corner, where nobody would find it again."

"Just my idea, and that's why I asked you," Owen continued.

"P'r'aps they woke up to the fact that they'd sent the poor chap to his death, and it scared 'em somewhat," Steve suggested.

"Well, it would take a whole lot to wake that bully up to anything, I think," was what Owen remarked. "It seems queer that wherever we go we have to take him into consideration, and figure about meeting his attacks, some way or other. There's going to be a big reckoning some day, though. Perhaps it may be closer than any of us know right now."

"If so be they've made our poor chum lose himself in Dismal Swamp, and he comes to any harm, they're going to pay the fiddler, believe me," and Steve clenched his fist when saying this, as though fully aroused.

Max was evidently trying to figure out what their next move should be. An error in judgment at this point might cost them dear later on; so that whatever they did, they must be sure they were right before acting.

To go back was impossible. The boats must be abandoned at this point, since they apparently could be of no further use to the trackers. Bandy-legs had gone into the dense swamp right there, and, so far as indications went to prove, he had not come out of it again. Hence their duty lay in that direction.

Again were the other three depending on the judgment of Max Hastings to lead them aright. Strange how much dependence they seemed to place in him; and it was not because Max was any older than his chums; but he happened to possess a bold, resolute nature, that could not be easily daunted, and was ready coolly to grasp the horns of any difficulty.

Then, besides, the previous practical experience which the boy had had along these very lines was of great value to him now. He knew how to do many things that were as sealed books to his companions. And once in the wilds, Max understood many things connected with the secrets of Nature; as, for instance, the ways of the fur-bearing little animals to be met there; how to follow a trail; the signs of storms that might be brewing; how to progress in a straight line in pitch darkness; and dozens of other points invaluable to one who expects to be in the woods any length of time.

Steve anticipated what was bound to happen, even if he could not boast of much woods lore. He went over to the boat, and began to pass out the lantern and some of the food that had been made up in small packages, so that it could be better stowed away without getting under their feet as they moved about while pushing or punting the craft.

And Toby, understanding what was about to take place, hastened to follow his example by relieving the second boat of its cargo, which he piled up on the shore.

“That’s right, fellows,” commented Max. “We’ve got to try to follow Bandy-legs the best way we can, though I’m afraid it’s going to knock my little knowledge of trail finding to flinders. I never tried to chase after anybody through a swamp before this occasion, and I can see what trouble it’s bound to give us. But, then, we can give a whoop every little while, and if he’s in a condition to answer, why, we’ll get track of him sooner or later.”

Somehow there was that in what Max said to make the others feel uneasy. Usually he was so confident that his manner buoyed up their drooping spirits wonderfully; but to hear Max talk in this way looked bad. Of course it was the old swamp that influenced him more than anything else. It was gloomy enough to discourage anybody, Owen believed, as he looked around, and thought of poor Bandy-legs adrift in such a place, trying to find a path that was above water, and every little while slipping down some treacherous bank, to only pull himself out again with the greatest difficulty.

And it had been more than twenty-four hours now since he left that boat; a terribly long time for anyone to be wandering around in that dangerous zone of mud and water, snakes and wildcats, with muck beds waiting to engulf him at every turn.

In almost absolute silence, and looking exceedingly grave, the four boys divided the various packages among them, and prepared to start out upon the trail

left by Bandy-legs when he fled before the derisive shouts and threats of reckless Ted Shafter and his two equally cruel companions the day before.

Steve took occasion to mark the time.

It was just four o'clock!

CHAPTER VII.

THE PERILS THAT LAY IN WAIT.

"ARE we ready to go now?" asked Owen.

"Just wait a minute more," answered Max; "and I'll have my bearings pretty well fixed; so that if we want to come back here to the boats, I reckon I can show the way."

"Well, what a lot of ninnies the rest of us are, to be sure," declared Steve, "to think that we were all ready to light out of this, and never know how we'd ever get back again."

"I was j-j-just noticin' that t-t-tree over there," declared Toby, pointing to a queer-shaped growth that, once seen, could never be forgotten. "And s-s-sayin' to myself that the b-b-boats were c-c-close by it."

"Yes, that'd be all good enough if we happened to prowl around this quarter some time or other; but it wouldn't lead us back," affirmed Steve. "Now, Max, he's getting the points of the compass straight in his head; and ten to one he's made the cutest little map in his mind, marking just where this spot is. And if we want to come back he'll take us here straight as the crow flies, believe me."

"Oh, hardly that," said the person in question. "But I do believe I could find it again later on. Ready now, fellows; let's be going."

With Max in the lead, Steve and Toby following next in line, loaded with the various packages, and Owen bringing up the rear, carrying a gun and two lanterns, the little party of rescuers started along the plain trail left by the fleeing Bandy-legs.

For a brief time even those entirely unused to such work could plainly see the footprints left by the broad-toed shoes of the lost chum. Once or twice they lost the trail; but Max did not seem to have any difficulty keeping straight on.

"Right here," he remarked presently, "Bandy-legs came to his first stop, and listened to see if he was still pursued. Then, thinking that they might be coming, even if he couldn't notice the fact, or scared by some sound of a moving animal near by, he once more started off."

"On the run again?" asked Owen.

"On the run," was the ready response. "You can see from the way the toe of his shoe pushes hard into the ground that he was running. That's easy, dead easy. But I reckon that the next time he stops he'll go off on a walk."

"But in following the firm ground he's already mixed himself up, and got twisted all around, though perhaps he didn't think so right here," suggested Owen.

“All Bandy-legs was thinking about was to get beyond the reach of those three old enemies who had shouted out all sorts of nasty threats as to what they meant to do to him, now that they had caught him alone. We happen to know that, generally speaking, only one idea at a time could push through Bandy-legs’ brain. Later on, when he found that he wasn’t being chased, he’d rest a while; and then try to go back to where he’d left his boat. But by then he wouldn’t know any more than a four-year-old which way to head, and chances are he’d go in just the exact wrong direction.”

Once more they started off, and for a little while followed the trail. Then Max announced that the weary Bandy-legs had dropped into a walk, as the signs proved. Five minutes afterwards, he said the fugitive had again halted.

“Hearing no signs of pursuit,” Max explained, “he stood here a little to get his breath. Then he walked over and sat down on that old log. See, here’s the mark of his feet alongside to prove it. Now, of course, I don’t know just how long Bandy-legs stayed here. Getting rested after a bit, he concluded that he could work back by another track. Perhaps he feared those fellows might be laying for him, and that if he tried to follow his own trail, as he should have done, of course, they’d just jump out on him, and pummel him dreadfully.”

Max showed them where the fugitive had walked

off, and it was at right angles to the course over which he had come to that spot. That was where he made his first big blunder. Once he became in the slightest degree mixed up over the points of the compass, and in that terrible place, Bandy-legs would be as helpless as a babe.

Half-past four Steve had noted as the time, and he was surprised to find how great a change seemed to be coming over the scene.

Under such a dense canopy of leaves and branches even at noon there was apt to be something of a dimness about things; and as the afternoon wore along this uncertain light became more and more pronounced.

"Say, 'twon't be long now before it gets dark," Steve announced, as they walked along in single file, like a party of Indians on a trail.

"Poor Bandy-legs!" muttered Owen, showing where his thoughts were straying; "and to think this will be his second night here alone in such an awful place."

"And with not a single bite to eat," added Steve; "that's the worst punishment you could put on Bandy-legs, believe me, fellows. Of course, all of us like to eat; but he's a little more bent that way than the rest. Twenty-four hours and hungry all the time! It's too terrible to mention, that's what."

"If it keeps on getting darker all the while we'll have to light one of these lanterns soon," Owen stated.

"Not yet," Max observed, quickly. "Save all the oil you can. We may need every drop of it before we're out of this scrape. I can see all right, and will for some time yet. The trail is plain, because, you see, Bandy-legs never once thought anybody would be trying to track him. And even if he had, he wouldn't know how to hide things."

"Jupiter, look here what I found!"

Steve, while saying this, made a sudden dive into the side bushes, and reappeared holding up something with his disengaged hand; as he had tied the packages of food to his back for the most part with the cord that bound them.

"A c-c-cap!" cried Toby.

"It's his, all right," remarked Max, smiling. "Let me look at it, Steve."

"But what's this dark mark on it, I say?" exclaimed Steve, and immediately adding in a horrified tone: "Oh, I believe it must be a blood spot, boys! Something's happened to our poor chum. P'r'aps he met up with one of those wildcats that Black Bob says he's heard yowling in the swamp lately."

"No, I don't believe that happened," returned Max, sturdily. "Anyhow, the trail doesn't say so. It runs on smoothly, and if there'd been a sort of rumpus you may be sure we'd see the signs of a lot of kicking around."

"But how would he lose his cap, then?" asked Owen.

"Oh, that might happen easily enough," replied the other. "He might have passed under some creepers like these right here, and, not stooping far enough, they just picked his cap off as neat as you please. And Bandy-legs, I reckon, never knew it till later on when he put his hand to his head."

"Guess you're about right there," observed Steve. "I've had my cap taken off my coco, and never knew it at the time. But that don't explain about this nasty stain, Max. Do you think it is dried blood for a fact?"

"Yes, I do; but the chances are Bandy-legs must have scratched his hand on some thorn, and it bled a little. Let's hope that accounts for the stain, anyhow. From this point on he seems to be walking fairly strong; though now and then he wobbles a little, like he might be getting tired."

"How'd it do to give a yell about now?" suggested Steve.

"All right; let her go, then," Max replied.

Accordingly Steve shouted several times, and they listened carefully in the hope of catching some sort of response, however faint. But after waiting a full minute all were compelled to confess that they heard nothing but the murmur of the dying breeze up among the tall tree tops, or the caw of a passing crow.

"No use," admitted the discouraged Steve. "He ain't within half a mile of us right now; or if he

should be, poor old Bandy-legs ain't in a condition even to call out. And he'd sure know my yell all right, if he heard it."

"I was just thinking," ventured Owen, "about that stain on the cap. Perhaps the rest of you will remember that often Bandy-legs used to get the nosebleed when in school."

"Why," said Steve, quickly, "I've known him to get excused by the teacher as many as eight or ten times to go out to the pump and use the cold water. It got to be a regular trick with him when he got tired sittin' there."

"The excitement and his warm run may have brought on an attack like he used to have a year or two ago," continued Owen.

"I believe you're about right," Max declared, approvingly; "and, as I said, there was nothing happened to him, anyhow, for he walked away from that spot just as spry as anything. You can see for yourself that, outside of a limp with his left leg, he seems to be getting on first rate up to now."

"What's that, a limp with his left leg?" burst out the incredulous Steve. "Say, are you just giving us a little taffy, there, Max, or can you sure tell that from the tracks?"

"I wish I didn't need to expect anything harder ahead of us," answered the other, calmly. "Perhaps you can understand it if I show you. It's only a simple little thing in trailing, after all. Look here,

and you can see that the marks of his two feet are different. See how the left one bends more than the right. That shows he was trying to ease the strain on his left foot; either meaning to do it or just naturally limping because walking came easier that way. He must have strained his left foot or leg when he ran so hard, and tumbled several times, as we saw from the marks."

"That sounds good to me!" muttered Steve; although he looked queerly at Max and shook his head, as though hardly able to understand how any boy could figure out such a difficult problem.

But, then, to the tyro in the woods all signs are bewildering, just as the printed page of a book must ever be to the ignorant and uneducated mind.

"Well, it isn't so bad as you might think," Max went on; "for if he's lame, Bandy-legs is the more apt to hold up soon, and spend his first night in a swamp; in a tree, I rather guess."

"Why a tree?" questioned Owen.

"Well, that always seems to be the safest place in the mind of a tenderfoot, if ever he finds himself compelled to sleep alone in the woods. Somehow, I reckon he just thinks nothing can get at him up there. But it makes a mighty hard seat; and, as for me, I'd prefer my rest on the ground."

"It's g-g-getting mighty dark, I tell you," complained Toby. "Think she's g-g-going to s-s-storm, Max?"

"Oh, I hope not, for that would be the limit," was the reply. "As we can't see the sky any to speak of, we've got to guess about it. But I think the sun is shining up yonder still, though we don't see it. When you put on dark glasses everything looks brown, and you think it must be going to rain; but take them off, and it's all bright again. Well, that's the way it seems when you're in a swamp. But we've just got to go on, rain or no rain."

"I'm keeping that cap," remarked Steve; "and I only hope to see it stuck on the bushy head of hair belonging to our chum again."

They continued along for some little time in silence. All of them could readily see that there had grown to be a decided change in the aspect of their surroundings.

"This is what I call fierce going," mumbled Steve, as he came very near slipping into one of the slimy pools that seemed to lie all around them; and indeed would have fallen in only for the grip Owen gave him from behind.

"And you have to duck your head to keep from getting choked by the vines and creepers that hang from the trees," remarked Owen from the rear. "Twice now I've seen Toby get his neck in a twister that hung down just like a rope."

The party mentioned turned to grin at Owen.

"Huh," he remarked, "shows I ain't g-g-goin' to be ever h-h-hung, anyway!"

"I don't know about that," ventured Steve, "if I was asked my opinion I'd likely say you knew you were for a dead certainty, and was tryin' to see what it felt like"; and, having taken the gun from Owen for a brief period, he moved up more closely to Max, as if afraid that Toby would pummel him on the back for saying such things about anyone connected with the Jucklin family.

Even this small circumstance was fated to have an important bearing on events yet to follow, showing that trifles sometimes occupy a place of their own.

The move on the part of Steve brought him alongside the leader, and for a few minutes he thought he might as well keep Max company. Perhaps some new feature connected with the trail might arise; and Steve's interest in the work being done was growing warmer the farther they advanced.

"Now we're coming to the worst of the whole trip," announced Steve, as he noticed the dense brush ahead, through which they would in all probability find themselves compelled to pass.

It was actually getting dark now. Steve even found that he had to lean over in order to see the marks left by the lost chum.

He was in this half-bent attitude, and paying little heed to what might lie ahead of them when all of the boys were electrified by hearing one of the most vicious snarls that could be imagined. And Steve,

looking up hurriedly, saw something that gave him quite a shock.

“Wow!” he exclaimed, almost in an awed whisper, “a wildcat, and mad as thunder in the bargain! Watch me riddle him, will you!”

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM BAD TO WORSE.

"Hold on, Steve!" said Max, quickly.

"But look at the critter crouching there, Max; sure he means to jump at us like a house a-fire!" protested the other, who was trying to get his gun in position; a task that was not so easy as it seemed, because of the many packages which hung from the boy's back, and which interfered with the free use of his arms.

"No, not yet a while," Max continued, in a low tone. "I ought to know something about the habits of the animals. You see he's been making his supper on something there in the bushes, and objects to being disturbed by a lot of boys."

"Oh, Bandy-legs!" gasped Steve, turning white.

"Not a bit of it," Max hastened to declare, knowing that he had unconsciously given the other a shock. "A rabbit, or some small animal that he's been able to pull down. But that cat's a fighter from away back, and he don't mean to sneak away, not if he knows it."

"But, Max, we oughtn't to try and go around, had we?" pleaded Steve, aggressively. "Just be-

cause a measly old bobcat chooses to block the trail, do we have to eat humble pie, and crawl? Let me show you how I can nail him. Why, at such a short distance my load of shot will be just the same as a big bullet."

"I know; but that's a dangerous beast, and we can't afford to take any chances with him, Steve. Let a wounded cat get in among us, and he'd do some tall gouging and scratching before we could knock him on the head. They're hard to kill, too, that way."

"But what are you going to say about it, Max?" asked the other, as if almost tempted to take the reins in his own hands for once and let drive.

"We'll both fire at once, and make sure of him. And you do the counting, Steve, one, two, three, and let go at three. Then everybody jump aside because he might leap even if he has a fatal wound. You know that a cat is said to have nine lives. Now, start in, Steve."

Slowly the two boys had raised their shotguns until they covered the crouching form of the savage beast. The wildcat certainly did look to be a dangerous customer right then and there. With his ears laid back, and the long hair on his neck standing up, while his yellow eyes were blazing with concentrated venom, he seemed to dare the boys to chase him away from his meal.

"One!" said Steve, as he laid his cheek close to the stock of his gun.

"Two!" he went on, caressing one of the triggers with his trembling forefinger.

"Three!"

"Bang!"

It seemed like one shot, so nearly together did the two guns go off. And remembering the wise advice Max had given, every one of the four boys instantly threw himself aside in some sort of fashion.

Max had a faint glimpse of some of the contortions through which his chums passed in carrying out this part of the programme; and afterwards declared that he would give a great deal to have been able to catch a photograph of the bunch with their heels in the air, arms flying, and packages strewing the ground.

Nothing happened either, that is, nothing that was calculated to cause them any concern. Something was evidently wrong with the wildcat, if one could judge from the scratching and snarling and bouncing that was going on in the quarter where he had just been seen, crouching so ferociously.

Steve, after taking a couple of rolls, managed to scramble up on one knee. Here he brought his gun forward, for he had clung tenaciously to the double-barrel through it all, and drew back the hammer.

"Hold your fire, Steve," came from behind him. "He's as good as done for, no need of wasting any more good powder and shot on that beggar," and, looking back, Steve saw that Max was on his feet,

ready to shoot the second barrel if he had deemed it necessary.

Even Owen and Toby came to time about then.

"Is it all over?" asked the former, poking his head out of the bush into which he had scrambled so hastily.

"All but the shoutin'," replied Steve, pleased to think that he had been concerned in the disposal of so savage a beast as the one that had disputed their right to any forward progress.

The wildcat now gave a last kick. Evidently he had gone hence, and would never again attempt to bar the way of the human race.

"Shucks, we had all them gymnastics for nothin'!" grunted Steve, as he tenderly caressed a bump on the back of his head, where it had evidently tried conclusions with an exposed root of a tree, and with painful results, not to the root, though.

"All the same, it was a wise thing to do," remarked Owen, making his appearance again, and commencing to collect his scattered packages. "I've heard a lot about what terrors these cats are, once wounded. Why, if that fellow had ever got in our midst, he'd have clawed us into ribbons. Oh, yes, I'll remember to do that side-stepping business again, if the time ever comes when I run foul of another cat."

"If a feller could only pick out a soft place to fall on, it wouldn't be so bad," complained Steve.

Toby had apparently been lucky in choosing his

tumbling ground, for he was grinning at Steve, and not showing any signs of wear and tear.

He calmly took out a long-bladed hunting knife, with which he had provided himself before starting on the expedition.

"What you goin' to do with that?" demanded Steve, suspiciously.

"D-d-don't you w-w-want to k-k-keep the c-c-claws?" asked Toby, bending over the dead cat.

"Why, yes, I'd like to, just to show that our story is true, if you c'n saw 'em off for me, Toby," replied Steve, mildly now.

"Sure," replied Toby, anxious to make some use of his new knife; and having been wise enough to give it a fine edge when he first bought it, there was not the least trouble in cutting off the whole four feet of the cat, with their terribly sharp claws, the very feel of which made Toby shrug his shoulders, as though he felt thankful he had not been raked by those poisonous claws.

"I'd liked to have skinned the critter," mused Steve, as he looked down at the victim of their double fire; "but it'd take more time than we can afford to spend right now. And, then, besides," he added, "it got pretty well cut up with the two loads we sent into the head. These'll have to do to remember it by. Do we go on again now, Max?"

"Well, I don't see anything else to halt us," replied the other, casting a quick look around him. "Sometimes these animals hunt in pairs, and per-

haps we'd best keep together a little. If the second one came up, and found out what had happened, she might chase after us for a little revenge. They're fearless customers, some of 'em are, and especially when mated; or a mother with her cubs."

"I'm glad, then, that this wasn't a mother," remarked Steve, who really had a warm heart, as most headstrong people have. "Because I'd hate to leave any baby animal, even a wildcat, to starve to death."

Both boys had renewed the exploded shell in the one used chamber of their guns. And neither of them felt sorry that prudence had dictated that they fetch these handy weapons along with them. There may be few occasions for using a gun in the middle of summer; but when a time does suddenly arise, the need of it is very urgent.

Now they were moving in as much of a little clump as possible, with those who carried guns keeping watch and ward, in order to make sure that nothing in the way of a hostile animal approach without being discovered.

Since Max was having more difficulty in keeping on the track of the fugitive, he handed over his weapon to Owen.

In some places the walking was very bad indeed, and they could plainly see where the boy whom they were tracking had slipped into a few of the little traps that lay in wait for unwary feet.

Still, he seemed to have been able to get along, somehow; and after Steve himself had gone in half-

way to his knees, where he thought he could find firm footing, he was unable to longer keep back a certain fact that had been impressing itself on his mind of late.

"Bully for Bandy-legs, that's what I'm saying, fellows!" he exclaimed, as he stopped to scrape some of the oozy mud off his shoes with a stick; "he's doing nobly for a greenhorn. Say, I feel like taking off my cap to him. But I bet you he was beginning to get scared about this time."

"Yes, for he knew now that he was lost," said Max.

"How do you make that out?" asked Owen.

"He stopped every twenty feet and looked around him," was the calm reply. "That was a sure give-away sign of a lost boy. North and south and east and west looked all alike to Bandy-legs just then. Little he knew which way he was headed. And yet what was the difference, when he didn't have the slightest idea whether he could get out of the swamp by keeping on in any direction? So you notice, whenever he started up again, he took the *easiest* way. That's why he changed his course six times in the last hundred yards. That sort of work would keep him going round and round in a circle till he dropped from getting hungry and tired.

"What sort of sound is that I hear?" asked Owen; "seems to me it's like running water. D'ye suppose that's possible, Max?"

"Oh, it might be," replied the other. "All this

water must come from somewhere; and perhaps we're near a little stream that flows down from a small elevation to join the stagnant stuff around us."

"Running water," groaned Steve, with a comical shrug of his shoulders and a grimace; "blest if I can hear anything else right along, except it might be the falling walls of a house that the Dowdy family *used* to live in. By now that water must be through all the ceilings in the lower floor, and I bet you they're smashing down like fun. Running water! Wow! I'll never hear a brook go purling along again without being haunted with these awful fancies."

"Well," said Max, trying to keep from smiling at the manner of his chum, which was rather comical, although Steve certainly did not mean it to be so; "I wouldn't bother my head too much about that business, Steve. Chances are you did turn the faucet off; and all this time things are as quiet and natural around your place as they were when you left."

"It's nice of you to talk that way, Max, and I appreciate it, too," declared the worried boy; "but if I only *knew*. Why, honest now, I'd willingly give every dollar that belongs to me in that nest egg we've got in the bank from the sale of our pearls, if I could be dead sure I turned that water off in the bathroom before shooting out of the door. That's right; and call myself lucky, too."

No one could say anything more to soothe Steve,

and so they had to remain silent, leaving him to nurse his own grievances and reproach himself for being so headstrong. But Max knew very well that it takes more than one swallow to make a spring; and while Steve might make lots of promises, when the ghost had been laid he would soon drift back again to his old ways of rush and hurry and neglect. "What's bred in the bone is hard to beat out of the flesh"; and Steve's father had always been just such a quick-moving man as Steve was a boy.

Three times now one of them had sent out a loud shout that should have been heard far away, and brought an answer, if so be the lost boy understood what it meant. It was Toby who suggested that Bandy-legs might, upon hearing them yelling, imagine that Ted and his cronies still hunted for him; and afraid to let them come up, he would keep on plunging deeper into the depths of the swamp.

"I hardly believe Bandy-legs would be quite so silly as that, Toby," Max had declared, after thinking it over. "In fact, the one great fear I have is that something may have happened to the poor fellow last night; because, you remember, we haven't come to where he stopped and roosted, waiting for morning to come. Once he did hold up a spell, and lay down on the ground at a place where it was dry. Then, again, I showed you where he spent a little time beside those blueberry bushes, picking a few handfuls. That showed he was hungry, even then. I reckon it was about three in the afternoon when

he did that. But he went limping and sliding on, like his grit still held good."

Owen took something out of his pocket and held it up.

"It's one of those two-barreled bicycle whistles, and makes a tremendous sound," he observed. "Perhaps, now, it might be heard even farther than a human voice. Shall I try it, Max?"

"Couldn't do any harm, Owen," answered the other indifferently; and so the owner of the double-barreled whistle, that had a hoarse, rasping sound, blew as hard as he was able.

"Hurrah!" cried Steve, suddenly showing signs of new excitement; "what's the matter with you fellows? Sure I heard an answer, faint like, and *away* off; but if it wasn't poor old Bandy-legs tryin' to let us know he heard, I'll—why, I'll eat my hat, that's what."

CHAPTER IX.

STEVE'S SWAMP CAMP FIRE.

NATURALLY enough, Steve's excitement communicated itself in some measure to the other three boys.

"Where did you hear it?" asked Max, quickly.

"What did it sound like?" came from Owen.

"I t-t-think I heard s-s-something, too, that was like a f-f-far-away c-c-call!" declared Toby, eagerly.

"Wait till I shoot off the whistle again," Owen continued, raising the little affair to his lips; "and then everybody listen for all you're worth."

No doubt each lad fairly held his breath as he strained his hearing to the utmost in the endeavor to catch the faintest reply.

"There! didn't you get it?" cried Steve.

"Sure!" ejaculated Toby, not even bothering to make a mouthful of the word, as he might usually have done.

They turned to look at Max. Even Owen had a hopeful expression on his face, for he, too, had caught the faint sound. To their dismay, Max shook his head sorrowfully.

"Only one of those miserable little swamp owls,

fellows," he said. "I've heard 'em too many times to be fooled now. And you can see for yourselves that it came from away off in that quarter, where Bandy-legs wasn't heading at all."

"Too bad!" muttered Owen, putting the bicycle whistle back in his pocket again as useless.

"Seems like everything's going wrong when I get in touch with it," grumbled poor Steve. "That bathroom faucet was sure my hoodoo to-day. If I only could remember just one little thing so I c'd feel pretty safe about that, it'd make me feel a whole heap better, I tell you."

"Now, what?" asked Owen.

"Just go on as we were doing," replied Max. "Remember he's got a whole day to the good of us, and that our only chance is to get close enough upon him to make him hear."

"Say, perhaps he got out of the blooming old swamp **after** all, and something else has happened to our good chum, Bandy-legs?" suggested Steve, suddenly.

"You're thinking now of what they told us about hoboes sometimes making their headquarters in the border of the Great Dismal Swamp, where they can hide when the farmers get to looking around to see what becomes of the chickens and hams they miss—is that it, Steve?"

"Just what I had in my mind, Max," replied the other.

"Could there be anything in that, do you think,

Max?" asked Owen, looking startled; for he had heard a number of stories about these traveling yeggmen, who were really burglars in the disguise of tramps, looking for banks in the country that might be easily broken into and robbed.

"Why, it's always possible, of course," answered Max; "but we've no reason for believing that such a thing happened to our chum. A greenhorn like Bandy-legs might wander around in this place for a week, and never know that lots of times he was close to the edge of it. When he'd come to a cranberry bog he'd turn back. That's just what he shouldn't do, for they lie all along the outer edge; and if only he pushed through he'd be all right."

Once more they started along the trail which Max managed to pick up. Dozens of times the other boys would have been at a loss to decide just where the footprints of the wanderer might be found, since they seemed to disappear. At such moments it was amusing to see how every one of them turned to Max with the utmost confidence. They believed that it would have to be a pretty difficult knot that the other could not untie.

So night began to wrap the swamp in its black mantle.

Soon Max found it so hard to see that he had to call upon Owen to light one of the lanterns. And with this held close to the ground the little party continued to creep along.

Progress was pretty slow under these circum-

stances; but the fact that they were able to make any advance at all pleased the boys who followed Max.

Toby and Steve cast numerous glances around them. They were really having their first real experience in a genuine swamp; and there was something so "spooky," as Steve called it, about the gloomy surroundings that they could not but be influenced more or less. Still, Steve, who was as bold as a lion, would never give up the quest for the missing lad because things happened to look so weird and "uncanny."

All of them were more or less tired, and when, after an hour of this slow work, Max announced that the trail had become so faint that he was really unable to follow it any longer by the poor light of the lantern, they knew that a stop was inevitable.

Besides, they were hungry; and when a boy finds himself in that condition, his first natural thought lies in the direction of satisfying the inner man.

"Move we have a bully old fire!" announced Steve, as soon as this decision on the part of the trailer was made.

"S-s-second the m-m-motion!" exclaimed Toby Jucklin, promptly.

"Sure thing!" echoed Owen, dropping his bundles to the ground with a sigh of relief; though had there been any real chance of coming up with Bandy-legs he was ready to continue the tramping right along.

"And the sooner the better," was what Max declared; which settled the matter.

Steve and Toby scrambled around and gathered some small wood, to which the first named applied a match. Then, as it caught fire, they began to add larger pieces, of which there was any quantity close at hand, until presently there roared a splendid camp-fire, that looked cheery indeed.

It had an apparent effect upon the spirits of all the boys. Steve even forgot to grumble about that dreadful mistake he had made earlier in the day, when he bounced out of the Dowdy home without bothering his head to see whether he had turned off the faucet in the bathroom or not. Perhaps, though, the fact that they were about to break their fast had something to do with the changed spirits of the lads.

Fortunately there was water close by which they could drink. The presence of a little gurgling stream may have had something to do with the readiness with which Max fell in with the proposition of his comrades for a stop over, when the trail temporarily vanished.

Twice now they had come across either this same stream, or another like it. Max admitted that it was a swamp totally unlike any other in which he had ever wandered. There were little elevated sections of firmer ground along which a small creek would come; and were an experienced hunter lost in this maze of muck beds and big timber, he would know that when he came across a running stream like this, all he had to do would be to follow its upward course,

and it would lead him to higher ground. But, then, it was not to be expected that Bandy-legs ever dreamed of doing such a thing. All he could do when in a panic was to push on, just as the whim seized him, trusting to luck to extricate him.

Soon the boys were seated around the blazing fire, and engaged in the always delightful task of diminishing the food supply.

"Anyhow, we won't have quite such a load to carry to-morrow," Steve announced, as he reached for his fourth sandwich.

"She sure m-m-makes prime goods!" said Toby, following suit; for, being a rather cautious fellow, he had been waiting for bold Steve to lead off.

"All we have to think of is the fact that our chum will be mighty hungry, when we do come upon him; and we must keep some stuff in reserve for Bandy-legs," remarked Owen, looking longingly at the gingerbread.

"I've got a package done up that isn't going to be touched," said Max. "It's half a chicken, some sandwiches, crullers, and a wedge of that gingercake, enough to keep even a savage eater like our chum alive until we get out to where there are plenty of eggs and things of that kind. But we must go slow to-morrow, that's sure."

"Yes, to-morrow, that's right," said Owen, with a sigh of relief, as he landed a comfortable piece of the brown spiced cake, and began munching it with

a look of contentment on his face; for if there was one thing Owen liked above all others it was this.

After they had come to the end of their feast Steve piled on more fuel.

"P'r'aps he might see the reflection in the sky, somehow," he said, while doing so, as if to excuse the action; "and it'd give the poor fellow heart to know his chums were lookin' for him."

"Yes, of course, a greenhorn like Bandy-legs could tell just by the glow above that Steve Dowdy built that fire," chuckled Owen.

"Well," added the other, "maybe he'll remember that Steve *does* like to have a bully old blaze when he can; and that might give him some speck of comfort. Anyhow, it makes it look better around here. You c'n see now that them hangin', twisting things ain't snakes, but just old vines and creepers. And if any wildcat happens to want to pay us a visit, to have revenge on us because we killed her mate, why, we c'd see to take aim."

As there was no lack of fuel, and no possible harm could come in letting Steve have his way in this particular, Max only laughed.

"Say, w-w-what kind of trees are they r-r-round here?" asked Toby, presently.

Max had noticed that he was staring hard in a certain direction, and had just been about to ask the meaning of his action when Toby put his question.

"Oh, quite a few kinds," he replied. "The big

majority of those you see in the swamp are water maples and oaks. Up on the little rises you can find a bunch of beeches every little while, because beech trees always grow in groups, and you seldom run across a single one. Then I've noticed a few walnuts, and even butternuts in the lot; though it isn't often you find that kind in a northern swamp. There are other kinds, too. If it was away down South, the majority would be cypress. But why do you ask, Toby?"

"I was wondering if any of 'em grew that queer kind of fruit," and as Toby said this without a break, he pointed off to the left.

"Where?" asked Max, trying to follow the direction of the extended finger; and then all at once he laughed.

"Well, I declare!" he exclaimed.

"I see it, too," called out Steve; "and it sure does look like the funniest fruit I ever saw growing on a tree. Say, Max, you know what it is; so give us the tip, won't you?"

"Pick up a torch and come closer," was all the other would say.

"Well, I'll declare, if it ain't some kind of animal hangin' up there to that limb by its rat tail!" exclaimed Steve, when they had gathered about the spot.

"'Tain't a b-b-bat, because I've seen that k-k-kind b-b-before!" said Toby, positively.

"Must be a 'possum, fellows; though to tell the

honest truth I've never seen one hanging by its tail like that," Owen remarked just then.

"That's right, it's a slick old 'possum!" cried Steve, laughing heartily. "Look at the tricky critter play dead, would you? Even when I poke him with this stick he just keeps on hangin' there. I've heard a ducky say baked 'possum and sweet taters made the finest dish going, and beat any suckling pig ever known. What'll we do with this one, Max?"

"Well, by the way we feel right now, we certainly can't eat him; and in the morning there won't be time to go to any bother; so we'd best let him alone," was the sensible reply of Max, who, under no conditions, would be guilty of destroying game that could not be used.

"What would he do if we took him down and put him by the fire?" asked Steve.

"From what I've read about the animal," remarked Owen, "he'd lie there as quietly as if dead until he thought no one was looking and then sneak off. That's why we always say a fellow is playing 'possum when he's up to slick tricks."

"I've seen 'em do it more than once," Max put in.

After playing with the hanging animal a little, and failing to get it to show any signs of life, the boys returned to the fire. Happening to glance up that way not more than five minutes later, Max laughed and called out:

"Look at your dead 'possum now, Steve!"

"Why, he's gone!" ejaculated the other, astonished.

"That's right!" added Owen; "he must have made up his mind that we meant to have him baked later on, and, as he didn't like the idea, he just watched his chance and skipped out without even saying good-by."

"M-m-my, ain't he the c-c-cute one, though!" grinned Toby.

"Makes me think of some fellers I know," remarked Steve.

"That's r-r-right," Toby instantly cut in with; "Amiel, f'r instance."

"He's the very one I had in mind," admitted the other, with a nod. "When Amiel Toots flings a paper wad across the room at school he's reading his book before the wad lands, and looks as innocent as an angel. Talk about playin' 'possum, he's got 'em all beat a mile."

"Now, I always thought Ted Shafter was a pretty good hand at making out to be dead to the world when things were being investigated after he'd played hob all around," Owen observed.

"Wonder just where poor old Bandy-legs c'n be right now, and if he had enough sense to carry matches along with him when he went out fishin'?" Steve remarked some time later, after he had yawned as though sleepy.

"He told me once that he was never again going

to be without a supply of matches when away from home," Owen declared.

"Well, if he had any along with him, they must have been soaked and made useless when he slipped into the water, as we know he did lots of times," Max suggested.

"You say that because we haven't seen any sign of fire around; isn't that so, Max?" demanded Steve.

"Well, I've looked the best way I could, seeing how we're surrounded by trees, and I couldn't find the least sign of any fire anywhere," was the reply Max made. "Still, we have to remember that Bandy-legs mightn't think to pile on the wood like you do, Steve. He isn't such a fire worshiper either. And that might account for our not getting a glimpse of his blaze."

"Well," went on warm-hearted Steve, "I only hope the poor old feller is in a condition to enjoy a blaze as much as I am. But, look here, Max, how do we expect to sleep to-night? We haven't got our tents and blankets along; and it's going to be roughing it for sure this time."

"I was just going to say we'd better get our beds ready," replied the other. "We've got a hatchet, and with that it won't take long to cut some of this nice hemlock, which makes the best bed you ever saw. If we keep the fire going a little all night we won't feel the cold any to speak of, I reckon."

"Yum, yum, a hemlock snooze for me," said Steve, reaching over for the hatchet, so as to get

busy without further waste of time. "I always did like the smell of the stuff more'n I could say. If it wasn't for a few things now I'd be as happy as a clam; this job of findin' our chum is one, and then you know there's that measly faucet business on my nerves for another."

Max just at this moment felt a nervous little tug at his sleeve; and, turning his head, found that it was Toby, who in this way tried to draw his attention—Toby, who with sudden alarm in his face and eyes, whispered:

"M-m-max, l-l-listen!"

"What's wrong, Toby?" asked the other, in a low tone.

"I d-d-don't k-k-know," replied the stuttering and trembling boy, as he bent his head still closer to that of his chum; "b-b-but there's *s-s-somebody* b-b-behind that b-b-big clump of b-b-bushes over there a-w-w-watchin' us!"

CHAPTER X.

THE WATCHER BEHIND THE BUSHES.

"Don't point that way!" hissed Max, as he thought he saw Toby about to raise his hand with a finger extended. "And try to look natural, just like nothing was the matter."

"B-b-but what c-c-can we do, Max?" asked the other, in sore dismay.

"No hurry," replied Max. "First we want to let Owen and Steve know about it. Perhaps after all it might turn out to be another 'possum or a 'coon peeking in at us."

"N-n-not on your life, it wasn't!" Toby sent back. "I s-s-saw him lookin' out, and it was s-s-sure a h-h-human face, Max."

"See here, did you recognize it; was it our old friend, Ted Shafter, or either of his shadows?" demanded the other.

"Huh! I c-c-couldn't s-s-say for sure, Max. You s-s-see, there's a s-s-shadow over there. But it was a f-f-feller's f-f-face, all right."

"Steve!" said Max, in an ordinary tone.

"Hello!" came back from the one addressed, who was industriously lopping off the lower branches of

a thick hemlock tree that chanced to grow close by the camp.

"Come here, and bring your hatchet; I want to ask you something; you, too, Owen," continued Max.

So, a few seconds later, the four heads were close together.

"Now, be careful both of you, and don't give the thing away," cautioned Max, in his low voice; "but Toby, here, has made a startling discovery. Fact is, we're being watched by somebody!"

"Wow, like as not one of them hoboos that live in the swamp!" muttered Steve, as usual quick to jump at conclusions.

"Perhaps not," observed Owen, calmly; "if anybody's having a look-in on us right now, I'd think it might be Ted Shafter."

"Where is he at; up in a tree like our 'possum?" Steve went on.

"Oh, no, but lying behind that big clump of bushes back of you, Steve," Max went on to remark. "Now, be careful, and don't give it away that we know he's there."

"But I must lay hands on my gun, don't you see?" expostulated Steve, as he willingly transferred the hatchet into the keeping of Owen.

"Well, just saunter that way, and when I give the word pounce on it," Max remarked; "but, Steve, no snap action now. We can't afford to wound anybody without mighty good reason for it, understand?"

"Oh, I'm on all right, Max," said the other, in a grumbling way.

He walked aside and bent down, as though interested in something; as indeed was the case, for his own shotgun lay there within reach of his eager hand.

"Owen," continued Max, "when I give the word you make a bolt around to the other side of the bush clump, and threaten the fellow with your hatchet if so be he tries to skedaddle. Toby, keep close to Owen, and be primed to make a football tackle if you see him starting to grab the watcher. All ready, now!"

"L-l-let her go, Gallagher!" exclaimed Toby.

"Come on, boys, surround the place!"

With these suggestive words Max suddenly leaped to his feet, and darted off so as to get on one side of the bushes; while Steve, having snatched up his gun, hastened to occupy a position on the other side.

Since both Toby and Owen blocked escape in a third particular place, it seemed as though they must have something within the net.

"Surrender!" exclaimed Max, leveling his gun at what he took to be a moving object, that looked darker than the surrounding shadows back of the bushes.

"If you run we'll fill you full of birdshot!" called out Steve, who had also covered the suggestive spot.

"Please don't do that!" came in a wonderfully meek voice; and then the shadows gave up a moving figure that advanced toward Max.

It seemed to be a little man, who held both hands high above his head, as though he wanted his captors to see that he did not have the slightest idea in the world of either provoking them by an attack or an attempted escape.

Max realized immediately that somehow neither of the two theories they had formed seemed to be the right thing. This was certainly not Ted Shafter; and so far as a desperate hobo was concerned, no one could imagine a greater contrast than this humble, frightened little man presented to that lawless class of wanderers.

In fact, Max found himself ready to burst out into a laugh. This was almost as funny as that strange fruit Toby had discovered growing on a tree, and which turned out to be a cunning opossum.

He had a hunted look in his eyes, however, did the party whom they had now captured. And Owen, seeing this, made up his mind that no doubt the little man must have committed some crime, such as robbing his own till; and then, overcome with fear of the result, had fled to the swamp.

Steve and Toby had been rather taken aback when, instead of the desperate enemy they had expected to appear from behind the bushes, this inoffensive looking little man stalked into view.

He stood there with folded arms, and his attitude told of utter despair.

"I want you to know, gentlemen," said the other, with a gulp, "that I surrender to superior force.

It will not be at all necessary for you to threaten me with your firearms. I yield myself a prisoner, and will go back with you peaceably, although most reluctantly, I confess. Circumstances have been too much for me, and this time the game didn't work. But how was I to know she'd hire armed forces to hunt for me?"

He deliberately sat down, and began to open a wallet he carried slung across his shoulders. Out of this he took some bread and ham, which he began to munch with evident relish.

The boys looked at each other. None of them could understand it in the least as yet. Who this queer little runt of a man was, and what crime he had committed that compelled him to fly to the shelter of the Great Dismal Swamp, were things utterly beyond their grasp as yet.

But as he did not seem to possess anything in the shape of weapons, as far as they could see, and seemed so utterly in their power, both Steve and Max quickly allowed their guns to point toward the ground. Even Owen opened his fingers and let the hatchet drop.

"You're very much mistaken if you think we've been hired by anybody to look for you," remarked Max, bent on drawing the other out.

At that the little man looked up eagerly, his eyes snapping with delight.

"Do you mean to tell me that for a fact?" he asked, leaning forward, and addressing Max in par-

ticular, as though something told him he was the leader of the quartet around him.

"We are looking for our chum," Max went on to say; "a boy who has been lost in this swamp for two days now. When one of our party discovered you watching us we thought you might be a tramp. That's why we carried on like we did."

"And *she* didn't send you out to look for me?" continued the other, as though the biggest part of his load might be slipping off his narrow shoulders.

"We don't know who you mean!" declared Steve.

To the surprise of his chums, Toby just at this moment seemed to be seized with a convulsion of laughter. Partly controlling his feelings the stuttering boy stepped forward and tried to address the little man, though in his excitement he made rather a sorry mess of it.

"S-s-say, ain't your n-n-name J-j-jones?" he asked.

The little man nodded his head rather dejectedly, as though, truth to tell, he were not inclined to be very proud of the fact just then.

"J-j-julius C-c-cæsar J-j-jones?" went on Toby.

"Alas! that is a fact," the other admitted, sadly; "I was christened that by my adoring mother when a squalling infant. I rather think it weighed too heavily on me, for all my life I have lacked spirit and fire and valor. Under almost any other name I might have held up my end of the log; but that was

too strong. People expected too much of me; and I failed 'em, I failed in nearly everything."

"What does it all mean, Toby?" demanded Steve, impatiently; for he never had the patience to solve any riddle, and always wanted to look in the back of the book for the answer.

Toby raised his hand almost as far as he could above his head.

"Huh! M-m-mister J-j-jones, he's g-g-got a w-w-wife, and she's that h-h-high!" he observed, at which the little man nodded his head approvingly.

"And wide in proportion, don't forget to state that fact, son," he remarked, as he drew in a big breath, and somehow cast a quick look around him, as though fearful lest the lady in question suddenly make her appearance on the scene to take him by the ear and lead him home again.

"And, s-s-say," Toby went on, exultantly, "she s-s-stutters worse'n I d-d-do!"

"Only with her tongue, my boy, only with her tongue," declared Mr. Jones between bites. "She never hesitates a second with her hands. Fact is, she's too handy," and he rubbed the side of his head as he said this in a way the boys could understand.

Max had before now grasped the true inwardness of the thing. He remembered having heard about a small farmer named Julius Cæsar Jones who had a strapping big Amazon of a wife, and who was about the worst henpecked man in the county. They used to tell a good many funny stories about things that

happened at his farm; and he could remember hearing his father laugh as he related several to his mother.

Evidently, then, Mr. Jones and his wife must have been having another little falling out; and being afraid of punishment, the little man had taken to the woods in order to hide until her anger had had a chance to cool off, when he might find it safe to go home again.

From what he had said, Max rather believed that this was not the first time such a separation had occurred. He seemed to have laid in a supply of provisions, as if he meant to stay out for some little time. Possibly he had some secret means of learning when his wife, being repentant, was longing to see him again; and perhaps for a time peace would settle over the Jones home until the next outbreak.

CHAPTER XI.

TED SHAFTER'S WAY OF GETTING EVEN.

"THIS isn't the first time you've cut stick and run away, Mr. Jones, is it?" asked impulsive Steve, who, it seemed, had reached the same conclusion which came to Max.

"Why, to be candid with you," replied the little man, with about as near approach to a grin as his Napoleon-like face was capable of showing, "it is the third effort on my part to keep peace in the Jones family. Both other times I remained away for several days, until Hannah had gotten over her little unpleasant feeling, and sent word through a mutual friend that the storm had cleared the air. And for a short time it was quite peaceful-like under our roof—a short time." And he sighed, as he started in on a second wedge of ham and bread, some of Hannah's bread, no doubt, which looked good and white and firm to Max.

"How long have you been hiding out now?" asked Owen, feeling considerable interest in the queer little man who, despite his size, bore such a wonderful name.

"This is the fourth day, my young friends, four

long and weary days. And what nights, with the mosquitoes biting, and the wild beasts creeping all around me in this terrible swamp! Still, one has to do all sorts of things to keep peace; and it seems to be my duty to camp out every little while."

"Well, if you're going to make a business of it," suggested Steve, humorously, "why not build you a nice little shack somewhere in the heart of this swamp; a sort of cyclone cellar, to which you could retire whenever it stormed too lively?"

Max was afraid that the little man might become annoyed, and show some signs of anger upon being spoken to so familiarly as this; but to his surprise the other seemed to take Steve's suggestion in quite another mood.

"Well, now, that is a clever idea, my friend," he remarked; "and I thank you for suggesting it to me. Like as not this will become a regular habit in time; and if I must spend a good part of my days in voluntary exile from my own roof, why, I might just as well have a cozy retreat to which I could, as you say, retire when the storm signals are set. But I fear Hannah would in the course of time track me there, and my last condition would be far worse than my first."

Every time he mentioned that name he had a way of throwing a quick look over his shoulder. Max knew from this that he lived in daily fear of the hot-tempered Amazon who shared his home.

Of course, now that they had received an addition to their number, that should not really make any especial difference in their plans. They could make up their rude beds out of hemlock browse, and in the morning say good-by to Mr. Jones, leaving him to continue to play his hide-out game as long as his food supply lasted, or until he had word that his wife was in a softened mood, ready to welcome him back home with open arms.

"Possibly, now, you might not object to doing me a personal favor, when you find your friend, and go out of this beastly swamp," the little man remarked, as he fastened up his food wallet again, and mournfully noted the fact that it was by now in rather a flattened condition.

"If we can be of any assistance to you, Mr. Jones," said Steve, "just let us know how. We're willing to oblige, ain't we, fellows?"

"T-t-that's w-w-what," said Toby; "and specially in the c-c-case of M-m-mister J-j-jones, 'cause his wife, she s-s-stutters."

"Yes," added Steve, "and it must make him a bit homesick, just to listen to you pound your words that way, Toby. But go on, Mr. Jones, and tell us what you'd like to have us do for you."

"Why, you might happen to see my wife, you know, after you leave here," remarked the other, calmly; "and when she learned that you'd been in the swamp, she'd want to know if you'd seen anything

of a little runt that hardly knew enough to get in out of the wet when it rained. Of course you hadn't, I expect that you'll let her understand that much, my young friends; but suppose, when speaking, you thought to enlarge upon the *terrible things* likely to overtake a poor fellow, once he became lost in this swamp; it would touch her heart, and make her wish her Julius were back home again."

"If we happen to see her we will be sure to enlarge upon that subject, give you my solemn affidavit on it, sir," Steve declared.

Max had conceived an idea that he thought it would at least do no harm to follow out a little further. If, as they understood, Jones had been dodging about in the morass and among the cranberry bogs for several days, was it not just possible that at some time he might have had a fleeting glimpse of Bandy-legs? True, with his distrust of everybody he saw, the man in hiding might not have thought it policy to approach the boy and enter into conversation with him; but even if he had seen the other it would give them new confidence.

Max determined to ask him without any more delay. Jones had by this time come to look on them in the light of friends, and not enemies, so that no doubt he would be quite willing to tell anything he happened to know along that line.

And so, having made up his mind with regard to this, Max waited until Steve had stopped talking.

Then he turned to their strange and uninvited guest.

"I was just thinking that perhaps you might be able to do us a little good turn, Mr. Jones," he said, at which the little man looked up briskly.

"I would be glad of the chance, son," he remarked. "Once let me get back as the acknowledged head of my family, even for a brief time, and I will be in a condition to reward you as seems fit."

"Oh, rats, he don't mean anything like that, Mr. Jones!" burst out Steve, with a fine show of scorn.

"No, we would not accept any reward for simply doing our duty to a fellow human being in distress," Max went on, grandly. "But I was thinking that since you've been knocking about in this swamp several days, sir——"

"Six of 'em, my boy, six of the longest days I ever knew; and, as to the nights, I dassent mention them," interrupted the other, dejectedly.

"Well," continued Max, "do you happen to remember seeing any boy during the last day or so, a fellow about my size, except that he's got very short legs?"

"And they're kind of bent a little, too," asserted Steve, eagerly; not that he meant to make fun of the absent chum, but wished to have Mr. Jones comprehend better the description Max had started to give.

Hope instantly flashed into life within the breast

of Max as he saw the little man look up eagerly. In that moment he almost expected they were going to pick up certain information that in the end might lead them to Bandy-legs. Then, as quickly the flame died out again. Mr. Jones had shaken his head slowly in the negative.

"I don't believe I can say I've seen a living soul all the six days I've been suffering torments away from the buzzom of my family," he started to say; "but p'r'aps now I might have *heard* the boy you speak about."

"Heard him yell, do you mean?" demanded Steve. "Shucks! bet you, now, that was us keeping up a whoopin' and using Owen's old double-barreled bicycle whistle."

Then the little man went on to say:

"No, I do not refer to that noise, which I heard myself during the afternoon just past, and feared was made by a posse Hannah had hired to hunt for me. This was something different, son."

"In what way?" asked Max.

"First of all it happened last night," replied Mr. Jones.

"Well, that would come inside the boundary lines," Steve remarked; "because our poor chum was wanderin' around here somewhere then. He got lost about noon; and we've been follerin' his trail up to dark."

"Please tell us what happened last night," asked

Max, hoping for the best, and yet on his guard not to deceive himself with false assumptions.

Mr. Jones drew out a little old black pipe which he proceeded to fill with tobacco from a pouch he also produced.

“This has been the cause of most of my troubles,” he remarked, holding the pipe up and surveying it ruefully. “Hannah, she don’t like the smell of burning tobacco; and as for me, I just revel in it. I have to do most of my smoking outdoors. She won’t even let me enjoy myself in the barn, for fear of setting it a-fire.”

“But tell us what you heard last night,” Max went on, seeing that Mr. Jones was so full of his own troubles that he must be led along the way if they expected to learn anything from him at all.

“Why, you see, I had been sleeping under a dense bush, when, chancing to awaken, I heard low voices approaching, and saw the reflection of a moving light. Quite naturally then I hugged the ground, fearing that I could catch *her* voice among the number, and that my worst hour had arrived. But as they started to pass by my retreat I understood from the tenor of their conversation that they were boys, and also that they did not have me in mind at all when they exchanged remarks.”

“Boys!” repeated Max. “Could you give a guess, Mr. Jones, as to how many of them there may have been in all; two, do you think?”

"Why, that many, sure; and I think there must have been a girl along, or else a small chap; for once or twice I thought I caught a soft voice in between the other two harsher ones."

"That was sure Amiel," remarked Steve, quickly.

"And the others like as not Ted Shafter and Shack Beggs," said Owen.

"I fancy now that you are on the track of the truth, boys," declared Mr. Jones; "because once I heard Ted mentioned. Remember it, because it was the name my father wanted to give me, but mother refused to allow it. Yes, there was certainly a Ted among the three boys."

"They passed close enough to where you were hiding for you to catch something of what they were saying, perhaps, sir?" questioned Max.

"That is true, they did," came the answer.

"And could you remember any scrap of their conversation you picked up?" continued Max; while the other boys, as if suddenly grasping the meaning of his question, held their very breath in suspense, while waiting to hear what the little fugitive from his wife's wrath might reply.

"Why, yes. Let me think now," Mr. Jones went on to say, slowly. "The first thing I heard rather startled me, for the one called Ted by his companion remarked that somebody ought to be thankful if they didn't leave him there to starve."

"What's that?" ejaculated Steve, half starting up from his seat.

"Why, you see," the other went on, "I just thought they meant me at first, and as I had my bag of grub along I didn't see how I was going to get hungry, not for a few more days, at least. Then the other boy said something, and I began to understand that after all it wasn't about me they were talking."

"That was Shack Beggs; what did he have to remark?" asked Steve, taking the words almost off the lips of Max.

"Why," Mr. Jones replied, "as I remember it now, he seemed to be chuckling when he said that, anyhow, nobody could hold them in any way responsible, because they'd never put a finger on him; and that if he stayed there a whole week he could be mighty thankful if they took the trouble to come along every day and drop in a little grub. Course it was all like so much Greek to me, boys; but perhaps you may be able to catch on to the meaning."

"It sure's got a mighty suspicious odor to me, and that's a fact," asserted the boy who had long been known under the name of "Touch-and-Go Steve, because of his impulsive ways.

"Oh, d-d-do you think they were referring to our poor B-b-bandy-legs?" asked Toby.

"Looks that way," asserted Owen.

"I honestly believe it must be a fact!" remarked Max.

"Wouldn't I just like a chance to let 'em know what I thought of such low-down meanness," grumbled Steve, making a hard fist, and smiting the palm of his left hand with it, as thought in imagination he had Ted Shafter down on his back, and were giving him what he deserved, with interest to spare.

"Then I remember," continued Mr. Jones, making an effort to cudgel his brains still more, when he saw that what he had already told had excited the boys tremendously, "that the one called Ted, who had a very disagreeable voice, went on to say he guessed some of those old scores in the past would be evened up this time."

"That settles it, even if the rest didn't!" declared Max, between his set teeth; "listen to me, boys, and see if you agree with my idea. In some way or manner poor Bandy-legs managed to get caught fast in a trap of some sort, we don't know how, or what it was like. But these fellows, coming along through the swamp, managed to discover his plight. Instead of helping him out they just stood around and made all manner of fun of our chum. Then they deliberately left him, saying that they hadn't put him there, and couldn't be held responsible for his fix. They don't mean to let him actually starve; but expect to keep him there in that trap

ever so long; and come every day just to laugh at him, and feed him with bits like they would a starving dog. Now, what do you think of it, boys; have I hit the nail on the head, and what ought we to do about it? Let's have every fellow's opinion."

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE TRACK.

"You sure have struck oil, Max!" declared Steve, being generally the first to answer; but the other pair were not far behind him, and quite as expressive.

"That's what I say," Owen remarked, emphatically.

"B-b-but, Max, what k-k-kind of a t-t-trap?" asked Toby.

"Well, that's more than I can say, right now," continued the other; "but we're going to find out, by hook or crook; ain't we, boys?"

"And when we do, I pity Ted Shafter and Shack Beggs," grated Steve, furiously.

"And Amiel T-t-toots," added the equally indignant Toby.

"Huh! think they c'n get out of it by saying they won't be held responsible for what's happened to our chum, just because they didn't *put* him there," Steve went on. "Little they know what the law says. If a feller is goin' along by the river, and sees a baby drowning, and don't lift a hand to even *try* to save

it, you just bet the law holds him partly responsible, *because he let it drown!* I've heard my dad explain that heaps of times, and that everyone is morally supposed to help save another that's in trouble, or stand the consequences as an accessory to the fact!"

Steve was very fond of quoting law from time to time, and even said he meant to follow it as a life pursuit. But if so, he would have to tone down that impetuous spirit of his considerably, Max always declared; or else he would make a very poor lawyer.

Max turned again toward Mr. Jones, who was smoking contentedly away, while listening to the boys.

"If I should tell you, Mr. Jones," he remarked, impressively, "that Hannah was behind that tree yonder, it would cause you to feel considerable uneasiness."

Mr. Jones allowed his pipe to fall from between his teeth, as he stared at the tree Max pointed out, and actually shuddered.

"Well, you did give me a shock, son," he said, presently, with a queer, nervous little laugh that had nothing of merriment in it. "But you had some good object in saying that, I am sure."

"I wanted you to understand something of the feeling we boys have about the loss of our chum," continued Max, satisfied that he had again fully awakened the other, and set his brain to working

overtime. "Now, what you just told us seems to give a pretty fair clew as to what has happened to Bandy-legs. And if you can only put us in a way to follow up the trail those fellows made when they passed your hiding place it would end in our finding the lost boy, I really believe."

"Hear, hear!" cried Owen, enthusiastically following up the idea Max had in his mind; while Steve clapped his hands and remarked grimly:

"That's the stuff, now. When Chum Max gets his batteries all trained there's going to be something doing every time. Get the idea through your head, Mr. Jones?"

"I think I do, son," replied the little man, who seemed to have taken rather a fancy for Steve, despite the other's evident familiarity, which some other men might have resented from a half-grown cub of a boy.

"And do you think you could take us back to the place where you spent last night?" Max asked, eagerly; for he believed a great deal was going to hinge on that very thing.

Mr. Jones hesitated before replying. He realized that these boys were in deadly earnest, and that it would not do for him to deceive them by any false hopes.

"Yes," he presently went on to say, "I honestly believe I could find my way back there, because it isn't so very far, you see. But I'd have to have daylight to do it in."

"We've got lanterns along, Mr. Jones," remarked Owen.

"But while they might show us the path, they wouldn't help Mr. Jones get his bearings by certain trees he will remember," said Max, who did not wish to make a bungle of the job if it could be helped; and once they started, led by the fugitive husband, he desired success to follow their efforts.

"That's just it," declared the little man, nervously. "I think I hadn't ought to stir out of here before morning. Don't think I ain't wanting to help you all I can, because I am; and it ain't that I'm afraid of meetin' up with Hannah, because I ain't; but, you see, I've got my bearings in my head, and once I got away from the track, it'd be a question if I could ever find my way back again."

"Well, nothing can be done until another morning, then," Steve declared, in a dejected tone; "and poor old Bandy-legs'll just have to stick it out where he is. This is sure a tough deal on him, all right; and he ain't a-goin' to forget it in a big hurry, you mark me. Wonder if he'll be so scared that he won't want to go off with us when we visit Old Trapper Jim, away up in the North Woods later on?"

"Wait and see," remarked Max. "Now, d'ye know, I've got an idea that in the end this is going to prove a good experience for Bandy-legs. Nothing like going through the mill yourself to learn things so you'll never forget 'em; eh, Mr. Jones?"

“Well, I dunno, son,” remarked the other, soberly; “you’d think one experience had ought to’ve been enough for me; but seems like a body forgets when the sky is blue and smilin’ that it can cloud up and thunder and lightnin’.”

Steve picked up the hatchet again, and resumed operations on the hemlock boughs where he had dropped off at the time Toby made his astonishing discovery to the effect that they were being watched.

Of course all of them felt disappointed to know that after Max had evolved such a promising theory connected with the meaning of the words let fall by Ted and his cronies as they passed Mr. Jones on their way out of the swamp, they must waste so much time waiting for a chance to put it into practice. But being reasonable boys, and besides, having complete faith in the ability of their leader, they began to show that they could make the best of a bad bargain.

After Steve had cut a lot of branches Toby took a turn; and by degrees each of them, not even excepting Mr. Jones, whom they now looked upon as their guest, had a soft and fragrant bed of hemlock twigs upon which to pass the remainder of the night.

It would doubtless be a night long remembered by Max and his three chums; for every time they woke up to listen to the various sounds that floated to their ears, and which were connected with the

swamp itself, they had to get thinking of the jolly comrade who was absent from their midst.

And as for Bandy-legs, Max feared he would count every minute an hour, as the darkness hung over the gloomy place, wherever he might be.

All sorts of speculations had been indulged in as to the nature of the trap in which poor Bandy-legs was caught. He had evidently fallen into it through some of his own clumsiness, since those three mean fellows had been loud in their protestations that they had had no hand in the affair.

Steve suggested that it might be some sort of pit. He had heard of such things happening, where a shaft had been sunk for some purpose, either by some visionary dreamer after wealth, who thought he could find coal or silver or some precious deposit in the earth; or through the work of unscrupulous rivals, who dug the pit and covered it over with thin sticks, concealed by earth and leaves, in order to have the unlucky blunderer step into it.

Max, however, riddled this idea very shortly after Steve had enlarged upon it as a possible explanation of the fix Bandy-legs found himself in.

"I'd like to see you, or any other person, dig a hole five feet deep around here, unless you drained the whole Great Dismal Swamp first," he remarked. "Why, there would be water oozing into it before you got down three feet, I don't care where you started digging. So forget all about a pit, Steve."

"Then what is it?" demanded the other, discouraged when all his castles in the air came tumbling down under this kind of common-sense talk.

"Well, I can tell what it isn't, but when you ask me to explain, and map out the real thing, I'm off my base," replied Max, with a shake of his head. "So you'll have to think up something, everyone for himself, and when we get there we'll find out who was nearest the truth. I'm going to try to get a little sleep, boys, and I'd advise you all to turn in."

"That's so," observed Steve, as he threw himself down on his rude pallet; "last one up douse the glim, remember."

"D-d-does he m-m-mean put out the f-f-fire?" asked Toby, who, being slower, was still arranging his hemlock branches, so they would not get under his ribs and feel hard during the night.

"Not on your life," answered Steve. "Say, didn't you see Max fix that so it'd be all right for several hours? I don't want to try to sleep in this wildcat swamp without a fire, understand that. And whoever wakes up, make sure to toss on a few more pieces of wood. Plenty in that pile we made yonder."

"Only if it needs looking after," remarked Max. "I say that, because it would be foolish for every fellow to get up and keep piling on wood. A fine old blaze we'd have of it, eh?"

Steve chuckled as Max said that.

"Makes me think of an old chestnut, boys," he said. "Remember once, when a feller happened to say, when all the women folks of his family were around, that he did wish somebody'd cut about three inches off his duck trousers. First his old mother happened to think of it; and she goes and all by herself does the job. Then comes his wife, and thinkin' nobody ever cared for poor Herby but her, she does a little snippin', and sews the legs up again. After her the sister and the old maid cousin each tried their hand; and when Herby started to put his breeches on the day he was ag'in to play tennis they was only knee pants. Good-night, everybody. Me for the Land of Nod by the quickest line."

Mr. Jones before retiring had seemed to cautiously examine the ground just back of where he had fixed his hemlock bed. Max smiled while watching him, because he could give a pretty good guess what was in the little man's mind.

"Hannah!" said Max to himself, as he watched; "he never can get the thought of her off his chest. And, right now, though there isn't one chance in ten thousand that the big woman could drop in on us, Mr. Jones, warned by other experiences, wants to make sure of a way of escape. And they say McClellan was a little man, too. Wonder if all small men are that cautious. If they can't be fighters, they may prove to be great organizers and retreaters."

Finally even Max lay down, and silence brooded

over the strange camp in the Great Dismal Swamp, where the four chums and their guest, the henpecked husband of Hannah Jones, sought to forget their troubles in sweet slumber.

After all, it turned out that some of the boys were mistaken when they imagined they would be tormented all night long by thoughts of poor Bandy-legs. Almost before Max believed it possible, he knew from the deep breathing of Owen and Toby that they had passed over the border; nor were either of them heard from again during the whole blessed night.

Steve was not so easy a customer. When Max crawled over, some hours later, to toss a few pieces of wood upon the dying fire, making hardly enough noise, he thought, to disturb a weasel, which is said never to be found asleep, he heard a movement, and saw Steve up on one elbow watching him.

"Just a-goin' to do that myself," remarked the other, softly; and then dropped back again on his comfortable as well as fragrant couch, which he sniffed with a great deal of pleasure; because he had always read that hunters made their beds from hemlock browse.

The night passed away; and with the coming of day the boys were awake. Only for the cheery glow of the fire, which Steve had resurrected, being the first up, it would have seemed very gloomy and cold under that leaky canopy, and with so much water and hanging creepers around.

"By the time we get our bite of breakfast," Max remarked, "I'm hoping that the sun will be up, and then Mr. Jones will be able to find out his bearings, so he can lead the way to where he spent the other night."

"Bite of breakfast!" muttered Steve, disconsolately; "say, there's plenty of grub left yet, Max; and as we expect to find Bandy-legs this morning, why, let's eat all we want. Lunch can look out for itself, I say. What's the use always thinking of bridges you may never have to cross? Once we get out of this measly swamp, and any farmer's wife will fix us up a feed if we can pay for it. Even Hannah Jones'd do the same, I reckon, if so be we happened on her house the first thing."

Mr. Jones looked steadily at Steve, and then winked his eye as he said:

"You gave me your solemn promise, son, to say nothing that would betray me, in case you met up with my Hannah. Oh, what was that called out right then!"

"I think it was only one of those big green-backed frogs, sir," said Max, smiling at the look of sudden fright that came over the other's face. "But let's get busy with breakfast, now, such as it is. Nothing like we're used to having when out in the woods, is it, boys? But this was a hurry call; and there was no time to lug all our traps, frying pans and coffee pots and tents with us."

“Please don’t say that word ‘coffee’ again, Max,” said Steve. “It gives me a sure enough pain, because I miss it so. But here we are, fellows, and pitch in. I’m hungry enough to make a meal out of anything but a bobcat—I draw the line there!”

CHAPTER XIII.

STUMBLING INTO NEW DANGER.

"WELL, we're on our way at last!" remarked impatient Steve, as they left the makeshift camp where they had passed the night, and plunged into the swamp.

It always pleased Steve to be on the move. He was one of those fellows who never will believe they are accomplishing anything worth while unless they make a big noise, and there is considerable bustle going on around them.

The little henpecked Mr. Jones was in the van, with Max close at his elbow to ask questions if at any time doubts arose in his mind as to the ability of the other to make good.

But Mr. Jones at least displayed considerable confidence in the way he started out; and Max was resting easy under the belief that the small man knew his bearings fully. Well, he had had considerable experience around this same swamp. This was the third actual "hide-out" that he acknowledged; and there may have been many more of the same sort, for all they knew. Yes, Mr. Jones had good cause

to be acquainted with the dismal place that had accorded him a safe refuge, when the storm clouds gathered too thickly under the home-roof tree.

For some time all went well. Steve was for cutting off little corners when he could; and seeing this, Max warned him to be careful. But then Steve had great confidence in his own powers of observation, and believed that he could see a miry trap as quick as the best swamp dweller.

As had often happened in the past, this hurry scheme was fated to get Steve into trouble. Max was content that it should be so, for he believed, deep down in his heart, that the boy with the quick-action temperament must be made to suffer on account of his disposition many more times before he would begin to take warning.

They were moving along a particularly bad section, where Mr. Jones himself did not seem to be any too sure of his path, when there arose in the rear a series of splashes and sounds not unlike that made by a cow when drawing her hoofs out of the mud.

"Wow, this ain't as nice as it might be!" they heard Steve say, as if addressing himself.

Turning around, Max saw a sight that was altogether too comical for his risibles, and for the life of him he could not help laughing outright. Nor was he alone in this, for Owen burst into a loud series of sounds that must have been particularly irritating

to the object of the merriment; and even Toby gave a shout.

“Gosh, look at Steve tryin’ to go down to China, would you!” cried Toby; and as he did not stop to think about his failing he never skipped a single word.

Steve *was* a sight. In his eagerness to save time and cut corners, he had made a mistake and stepped right into a sink-hole of the worst sort. The deceptive surface gave way under his weight, and before Steve could spring aside he was sinking in the sticky slime.

Like everybody else who has ever found himself trapped by swamp muck, or the quicksand of a stream, Steve at first tried standing on one leg while he started to draw the other out. This threw all his weight on the remaining foot, which immediately sank lower, and when he reversed the order of things he found himself deeper than ever in the mire.

The only sensible thing to do under such circumstances, if the unfortunate happens to be alone, is to try to throw himself forward, and roll or scramble on hands and knees to a place of security. Sometimes this can be done; but no one ever escaped from the tenacious grip of a muck-bed by lifting one foot and throwing all his weight on the other, even for ten seconds.

Steve realized that he was making a horrible mess

of it. He had the good sense to stop operations and look up at his chums, with a half grin on his face. Steve, at least, could be good-natured under some trials; and he knew that his comrades would not let him suffer.

Had he been alone there would have been an entirely different story to tell, and that was where the boy might congratulate himself.

"Laugh, everybody," he said, jeeringly; "I reckon I do look just what I feel like, a blooming fool. The water's fine, Toby, come on in! Plenty of room at the top!"

"Huh, l-l-looks to me l-l-like they was at the b-b-bottom, too!" cried Toby, who showed no signs of being beguiled into joining the trapped one.

"He's playing the trick of the fox that fell into the pit," laughed Owen. "Don't you remember, boys, when the goat came along, and asked him what he was doing there, the cunning fox said he had made a great discovery, and invited his friend the goat to jump in and share it with him? When the silly goat did this, the fox just climbed on his back, and could then spring out of the pit. Toby knows too much to fall to your trap, Steve. He's had his eye-teeth cut this long time; ain't you, Toby?"

"A-a-anyhow, I k-k-know S-s-steve!" declared the other; at which they all had to laugh again.

"Say, what you goin' to do about this thing?" demanded the boy, who was now far above his knees

in the muck, which clung so tightly that had he tried he would have found it next to impossible to extricate either of his legs now. "I don't mind stayin' here so much, but suppose I did, whoever's goin' to turn that water off in the Dowdy house, hey, tell me that?"

"Oh, I suppose we'll have to bother getting you out, Steve," remarked Owen.

"Don't go to too much trouble, boys," continued the imprisoned boy, with a comical shrug of his shoulders; "this ain't so very bad, and perhaps I might manage to hold on till you get back. If you don't find me here, just take my love to all the folks at home, and tell dad it was me that left that faucet running. When he builds his new house he'd better have one of the kind that has to be held open, and shuts automatically whenever you let go. I've been thinking it all over, you see. Good-by, boys. Remember me to Bandy-legs, and say I'd like to have seen him the worst kind."

Of course Steve was only saying this for fun. He saw that Max was already unwinding the slender but stout rope which Old Black Bob had urged him to carry into the swamp with him. Max had wound this about his waist, as the best way of carrying it; another pointer the old swamp muskrat trapper had given him.

There was a noose at the end, and Steve could not help joking still further as he saw Max getting

ready to cast this over the limb of a tree that, fortunately, grew almost directly above his muck-bed prison.

"That's what they call adding insult to injury, fellows," he called out. "You're giving me a choice to be smothered in this mud or to hang myself. Say, that's kind in you, sure it is. But I think I'll fool you all by slipping the noose under my arms instead of around my neck. Pretty near a go that time, Max; put some more speed into the second cast, and over she goes!"

Max had tested the distance the first time, and when he made his next throw the noosed end of the rope passed over the limb and dangled there, swinging to and fro.

Steve was on the alert and made a quick grab.

"Yah! Thought you'd get away from me, didn't you?" he crowed, as he caught the swinging noose. "Have to get up pretty early in the morning if you expect to beat out Steve Dowdy." Then, as if realizing that it was foolish to boast while in his present predicament, he added in the same breath: "Though sometimes he does make a fool of himself, I admit, and gets too greedy. But give him time, and the poor chump'll learn. He's young yet, and mighty quick on the trigger. Now, pull tight, Max. That feels good to have something holdin' me up, when the other end is bein' pulled down right along. Get a grip, everybody; the circus is ready to begin!"

It surely was a circus, too. Owen, Toby, and even the little Mr. Jones had hold of the rope; and when Max gave the word they started to pull. The rope tightened across the limb, and Steve was heard to grunt, as he found his chest being compressed rather uncomfortably. But as the noose tightened so did his spirits rise to meet the emergency.

"Go it, you tigers!" he exclaimed, although not possessed of any too much breath at the moment, on account of the tightening rope; "hit her up again on the other alley! One good pull deserves another, they say. Give her Jesse, I tell you. Huh, moved a little that time, boys! Once more, and all together! Wow!"

This last was a mixture between triumph and pain, for no doubt it hurt considerably to have those four tugging at the end of the rope, the strain on his body being severe, so sticky and stubborn was the mud that had gathered around both his legs.

But soon Steve was lifted to the limb of the friendly tree. He hastened to embrace this and scramble up, so that he presently sat there undoing the rope.

"Thanks, awfully!" he said, mockingly, as he tossed the rope toward the others. "I've always heard it was a mighty good thing to have a pull when you got in trouble. There's Ted Shafter, who's got a dad high up in Carson politics; and every time Ted deserves being shut up in the cooler his dad's pull gets him off."

"C-c-come d-d-down, Steve!" said Toby, impatiently.

"Yes, we've wasted enough time as it is, and ought to be moving along," Owen added; whereat Steve, while hastening to obey, was heard to remark:

"Wasted! Well, I like that, now. I sure must be a pretty poor stick when one of my pards says that of me."

But he knew very well Owen cherished a warm affection for him, and that this was only boy talk.

When Steve had been scraped fairly clean with several sticks, and pronounced himself in a condition to walk, they started on again. Fortunately at the time Owen had been carrying Steve's gun, or that might have had a chance to sink in the mud along with its unlucky owner.

For half an hour and more they kept on. Max asked questions from time to time, and seemed satisfied that their guide knew where he was going. Mr. Jones looked confident and competent to lead them to where he had spent the night when he heard the other boys passing and caught fragments of their talk.

They had been pushing along in this manner in silence for some five minutes, when they met with a sudden and overwhelming surprise. Even their little guide apparently had had no suspicion as to what sort of nest he was leading his new friends to, if Max could judge from the exclamation of surprise that

broke from his lips when, as they suddenly issued from a dense thicket, they found themselves right on the border of a camp of hoboes.

The wind happened to be blowing away from them, and this had prevented anyone from smelling the smoke of the smoldering fire.

Max was as much startled as his companions, though he quickly realized that it could be no fault of their guide that they had run upon this hobo camp, since no doubt the fellows had come here after he passed on the preceding day.

There were three tramps in sight, all of them dirty footpads of the railroad type, with faces that would hardly be a recommendation to keep them out of jail, should they ever have the misfortune to be brought up before a wise judge who could read hobo character.

They had been lying around the fire, evidently dozing, when the sudden bursting out of the thicket on the part of the newcomers aroused them; for as Max sighted the trio they were just starting to their feet.

The two parties stared at each other a full minute without a word being spoken. No doubt they were sizing each other up in that space of time. And when the burly hoboes saw that they had only a squad of half-grown lads to deal with, no doubt mistaking the little Mr. Jones with his smooth face for another of the same type, they began to grin as though tickled.

Things seemed to be coming their way, they evidently thought. Ordinarily they had to do more or less walking before they could come into possession of articles of value; and here the best sort of pickings had actually stepped into their camp, as if the boys were asking to be relieved of their valuables.

When Max Hastings saw that ugly looking trio of grizzled tramps start toward himself and his companions he knew that there was going to be something of a racket unless he took the situation well in hand right in the start.

It was folly to think of appealing to the better nature of such rascals as these, for they had buried all that long ago. With them might made right, and if they could secure anything worth taking from these boys they meant to let no scruples stand in the way.

"Steve!" he exclaimed, without turning his head.

"Here, right alongside of you, Max!" came the cheery and steady voice of the other.

"Got your gun?" asked Max, quickly.

"Sure, and with both hammers pulled back. Just say the word and let me blaze away!" Steve replied, eagerly.

"Cover at that biggest fellow, and if he keeps on coming aim at his legs, and let him have one barrel only!" Then raising his voice, and speaking with an authority one would hardly expect to find in a mere boy, Max called out:

“Stand where you are or we’ll shoot! We’re not here to bother with you; but make up your minds that we don’t mean to let you get the better of us. Keep back, now, or take the consequences! Steve, make ready to shoot!”

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE END OF THE TRAIL.

"PUT up them guns!" growled the biggest of the three tramps, as he made a threatening gesture with his big fist; but Max noticed with secret satisfaction that the fellow was sensible enough to hold his ground, when he found that Steve was engaged in keeping his legs covered with the twin barrels of his shotgun.

"Not much we will," said Steve, quickly. "I'm just itching to give you a dose of shot that'll keep you laid up for a month or so. Just take only one more step this way, and I'm going to press this trigger a little harder. She goes on the hair, too, sometimes, old chap. I never gave a man a dose of bird-shot, and I'm wondering how many different kinds of holler you'd put up, if I let her fly!"

This kind of talk alarmed the hobo, who must have been something of a coward at heart, as so many of his stripe are.

"Hey, don't yuh go to foolin' too much with that ere trigger, younker!" he called out, hastily; and instead of coming on, Max saw that he was really retreating a step. "We thort as how yuh might be a

sheriff's posse, a-huntin' for weuns. If so be yuh ain't after us, we don't want'er have any trouble, do we, fellers?"

"Sho, reckons not!" exclaimed another of the three.

But Max noticed that while they no longer advanced, the men seemed just as anxious to move back toward another bit of brush close by. Possibly they meant to cut and run for it as soon as they had a good chance. On the other hand, he feared lest they intended to turn upon the boys as soon as they could find shelter behind convenient trees.

He knew very well that such men generally go armed, and, given half a chance, no doubt they would produce a variety of revolvers of the bulldog pattern. This was just what wise Max did not want to have happen.

"See here, men!" he called out. "We want to pass on, and not bother with you. If you know what's good for you let us alone, and we'll forget we ever saw you here. But if you so much as fire a single shot after us we're bound to give you back as good as you send. And, besides, we'll get word to the sheriff that you're hiding here in the Great Dismal Swamp. Is it a bargain, men?"

The hoboos looked at each other. Under ordinary conditions they would no doubt have disliked letting such fine pickings get away from them. But there was something in the bearing of this lad who faced them so resolutely, and told them what would surely

happen if he and his comrades were interfered with, that made them very reluctant to go up against the five. And, besides, they did not like the way that other impatient boy kept handling his gun. He acted as though it would be a real pleasure for him to have the chance to fire it off once or twice.

"It's a go, younker," growled the one who seemed to be in authority among the tramps. "Skip out o' here, then, in a hurry; an' reckon yerselves lucky in gettin' off as easy as yuh does."

"Huh!" grunted the disappointed Steve; "seems to me you're the lucky one. There goes the only chance I ever had to see if I could hit two legs at once. I only wish you fellers had had a little more real pluck, that's what I do."

The big hobo had to actually grin at this exhibition of disappointment; at the same time he rubbed one of his legs, as though congratulating himself that he had had the good sense not to tempt that fire-brand to pull the triggers his fingers were fondling.

So the boys, together with the alarmed Mr. Jones, pulled out, and continued on their way. Both Max and Steve kept watch of the rear, determined to shoot if they saw anything that would indicate pursuit on the part of the tramps.

But evidently the three hoboes realized that if they tried to follow those boys who carried guns, it would be as bad as "monkeying with a buzz saw," as Steve put it. At any rate, they failed to show up; and

after a little the boys felt easy again while pushing along.

Steve was grumbling to himself every little while. The others knew, however, that his bark was worse than his bite; and that the chances were he only did this for their benefit. But he did make out to be dreadfully chagrined because he had been cheated out of a chance to test his nerve.

"That's always the way things go with me," he went on. "I'm sure the unluckiest feller ever was. Here I had the best chance that'll ever come my way to see how many shot I could plant in a pair of shanks that need looking after the worst kind; and they showed the white feather. Then there's that blamed water business—think how it's wasting me to skin and bones worrying over that. Any other boy'd know just whether he did, or he didn't, turn that faucet off; but with me I ain't able to make up my mind. Sometimes I c'd just vow I remembered doin' it; and again I can't for the life of me say for sure. Then fancy me gettin' in that nasty mud back there. Well, somebody's got to pick the drumsticks, dad says, whenever we got a turkey; and many a one I've cleaned off, believe me."

The others only smiled to hear him complain in this way, knowing it was pretty much all on the surface. Steve liked to hear himself talk; indeed, there had been times when this weakness had gotten him into trouble, in school and out. But even so he was never cured.

"Are we nearly there, Mr. Jones?" asked Owen, after another spell had passed by, during which time they had made good progress.

"If you look ahead you'll see the very thicket in which I lay," came the reply that gave them considerable pleasure.

Two minutes later, and the little man who had run away from his wife was pointing out the exact spot where he had crouched, listening, while the three boys from Carson trailed past.

Max immediately took hold of the affair.

"Now, please try and tell us which way they seemed to be from your hiding place, Mr. Jones," he requested.

When the other readily pointed off to the left, Max asked the others to remain just where they were while he looked for tracks. Inside of a minute he called to them to join him.

"Got 'em?" asked Steve, joyfully, as he came up.

"Yes, here's the trail, as plain as anything, a whole lot of tracks, going and coming," Max replied. "From that I judge they followed their own trail when they came and went yesterday, visiting the prisoner. They knew when they had a good thing, and how easy it is to get lost in the swamp, or step off the firm ground into a sink."

"That's meant for me, I suppose, Max," chuckled Steve; "but p'r'aps I deserve a dig, now and then. Do we start right away, or must we rest?"

"Well, that's something the rest of you must decide," came the reply. "As far as I'm concerned, I'd be willing to put out along this trail at once."

"Count me in on that," said Owen.

"Oh, I'm not tired, very much; and whatever you boys decide on, I'm ready to do," Mr. Jones declared, bravely; for he had come to fancy the new companions fortune had sent him so strangely; and, besides, it was pretty lonely work camping out there amidst such dismal surroundings.

"I'm boiling over with wanting to find poor old Bandy-legs, and see how he'll get away with all this fine grub we've toted so long," Steve declared.

Toby nodded his head violently when they glanced at him; for that was much easier than stumbling over what he would *like* to say.

Accordingly, Max waited no longer, but started to pick up the trail. He never had an easier job, for the three boys, not dreaming they would be tracked, and least of all by Max and his chums, made no effort to hide their footprints. And the soft ground left the plainest of trails.

Steve seemed to have learned his lesson, for the time being. He kept between Toby and Owen; and wherever the others ahead stepped he consented to follow suit. Striking out on one's own hook might be all very well under some conditions, but it was risky business in the Great Dismal Swamp. Steve could testify to this; for every time he looked down at his still muddy legs he had positive evidence.

By degrees they seemed to be coming to a section where there were more large trees than any place they had as yet struck. And the ground in spots was fairly elevated. Indeed, one might think they were coming out of the swamp; but Mr. Jones assured Max, when the latter asked this question, that it was all a hollow delusion and a snare—that this was only a sort of oasis in the midst of the ooze, and half a mile at least of muck surrounded it on all sides.

Believing that they must even now be somewhere close to where their chum was being detained in some mysterious prison, which was known to Ted and his two cronies, the boys were on the alert for any signs of a lonely cabin. That seemed to be the only solution any of them could think of; though Mr. Jones admitted that he had never run across anything of the sort in his many wanderings through the swamp.

Steve wanted to yell at the top of his voice, in the hope that he might get an answer; but Max restrained him.

“Wait a little longer, Steve,” he said to the impatient one, “and then you can let go for all you’re worth. Let’s try and see if these tracks won’t bring us up to where Bandy-legs is. I seem to feel it in my bones we must be mighty close by now. We’ve stood it so long we ought to be able to hold out a little bit more.”

And so for a few minutes Steve choked down his inclination to give tongue and let off some of the repressed nervousness that was urging him on to *do* something.

"Huh, nary a cabin in sight, and I c'n see a whole acre around here, because the woods they're open like!" he exclaimed, presently.

"All right," observed Max. "Now give a hail; and we'll all listen to see if you get any reply."

Gladly, then, did Steve let out a whoop after his original style, meaning that the missing companion should recognize who it was, if by good luck he heard.

Once, twice, three times did he send out this yell. Then, as the echoes died away, all of them listened, with their hearts seeming to stand still with anxiety; so much depended on the result of the experiment.

"Oh, Steve, Steve!"

They were fairly electrified when they one and all faintly caught this cry. It was too weak to be recognized as the voice of their chum, Bandy-legs; but at any rate, Max could not say at this time that it was a miserable old owl that mocked their efforts to get in communication with Bandy-legs.

Steve jumped up and down in his evident delight.

"Say, did you hear that?" he cried. "He called my narre, sure as shootin', he did! Whoever but our chum would know it was me a-shoutin' like that? We've found him, fellers, we've found him!"

"T-t-then, s-s-show him to us, S-s-steve!" demanded Toby Jucklin.

Steve looked around again. He had just been remarking that not a sign of any cabin or shack was in sight. The woods were so open on this knoll that they could see for some little distance in every quarter.

"Now where in the dickens d'ye suppose that boy c'n be hidin'?" he muttered, as if perplexed beyond all reason by the tantalizing mystery attached to the affair. "There ain't a sign of any cabin; and his voice don't seem to come from up in the top of one of these here big trees. I wonder, now, if there mightn't be a cave of some kind around here. Let's try again. Hey, Bandy-legs, old sport!"

"Steve! Oh, Steve! I'm so glad you've come at last!"

They stared at each other. Plainly every word could be heard, but the voice seemed muffled, as though the speaker might be shut up in some hole that did not allow his loudest shout to sound anything like he intended it to be.

"Well, if he ain't got me guessin' good and hard," muttered the amazed Steve, as he continued to stare all around him, instead of locating the point from whence the indistinct hail proceeded.

These were the tactics adopted by Max; and already a faint smile began to creep over his face, as though what appeared to be the truth was dawning upon his mind.

Toby was the one who discovered this, and he lost no time in demanding that Max give them the benefit of his superior knowledge.

"He k-k-knows, boys!" cried the stammering one, seizing hold of the sleeve of their leader. "M-m-make him g-g-give it up. It ain't f-f-fair to k-k-keep us in the d-d-dark this way, is it?"

When Owen and Steve also turned upon him, Max found that he was in a fair way to be mobbed if he failed to communicate this information in a hurry.

"Yes, I've guessed where our chum is held in a trap, boys," he admitted; "but for the life of me I can't understand how he ever got there by himself. Now, just turn your eyes that way. Notice that tremendous old stump of a tree that stands up like a giant. Must have been the greatest ever in this section of big trees, when it was in its prime. That's where Bandy-legs is, right now!"

"B-b-but, I d-d-don't s-s-see him!" cried Toby, looking harder than ever.

"Course you don't," answered the other; "and for the simple reason that the old stump's hollow, and Bandy-legs, *he's inside the same!*"

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT WAS COMING TO TED SHAFTER.

WHEN Max made this astounding assertion the boys stared at each other as though hardly able to believe their ears.

Then Steve, impulsive Steve, made a forward dash. Straight toward the big stump he went on the run, as though bound to find out whether Max were telling them the truth, or saying what he had just for fun.

"Hello, Bandy-legs, where are you?" he bawled, as he came up close.

"Inside the stump, Steve! Oh, ain't I glad though, you've come to get me out! Are the rest of 'em there?" came from the other side of the wooden wall; and Steve knew now that it was true.

"Yes, we're all up here, and been huntin' you since noon yesterday. But, however in the wide world did you get inside there? Did Ted Shafter and his crowd have anything to do with it?" asked Steve, as the others came up.

"No, not in my gettin' here; that was my own silliness, I guess," answered the unseen boy ruefully; "but they did keep me here when they might 'a' had

me out. And they're a-goin' to come back again this very mornin' to give me another half loaf of old bread and a bottle of water. But, say, tell Max I want to get out the worst kind. The ants keep a-nibblin' me all the time, and I feel bad."

"Shucks, he's all right!" Steve was heard to say.

"Mebbe you think so," called out Bandy-legs, who evidently heard the remark; "but you just try it once, that's all. How'd you like to sleep standin' up. And think of me a-livin' on a musty half loaf of dry bread, just like I was a prisoner in a dungeon. Hurry up and do somethin', fellers, please!"

The others, as usual, looked toward Max to propose a plan.

"It would take too long to cut a hole through with our hatchet," observed the one who was in the habit of taking the lead in all these affairs that required more or less ability in the line of invention.

"The old stump would burn fine!" remarked Steve, with a chuckle.

"Hey, don't listen to him, fellers," called out the prisoner, instantly. "It's bad enough to have to stay in this measly old hole so long, without being cooked in the bargain. Sure the stump would burn; but think of me! I'm no 'possum to be baked with sweet taters, like Old Bob likes 'em. Max, think up some other way, won't you? Don't let Steve get out a match. He'd set the whole world a-fire if he had his way, that's what."

Max began to unwind the helpful rope again.

"This thing pulled Steve out of a peck of trouble, and it's good for another siege, I guess," he remarked, loud enough for Bandy-legs to hear.

"What's that, Max; have you got a rope along?" he cried, delightedly. "Them fellers kept a-sayin' they meant to bring one, but clean forgot; but they'd try and remember the next time they came this way. Oh, how they did rub it into me, though! I'd give anything for a chance to get back at that Ted Shafter."

"Well, chuck up!" said Steve; "and perhaps you may."

It was decided that Owen and Max should manage to climb up the big stump. This was no hard task, and they could plainly see where others had preceded them; for there were many scratches and other marks to show the passage of heeled shoes.

"Like as not one of them climbed up here to lower the bread and water to him," was what Max said, angrily; for it was humiliating to think that their chum had been treated just like he might be a bear in a cage, baited and taunted by those three scapegraces of Carson.

Once they reached the top of the big stump they found a large opening, where Bandy-legs must have slipped down in the beginning. And lowering the noosed end of the rope they directed him how to place the same under his arms. This being done, both set to work; and, having first made sure of their

footing, they succeeded in drawing the prisoner up to the top.

Bandy-legs was very stiff and weak from his long confinement. He blinked, too, as he came in contact with the bright sunlight, for he had been in almost absolute darkness many hours.

He was lowered to the ground in much the same way he had come up out of the stump's interior. Then the two boys scrambled down after him.

Steve had made ready, and by the time Max and Owen arrived on the scene Bandy-legs was bolting food at an enormous rate. Indeed, cautious Max had to warn him against stuffing himself too quickly; but it tasted so good to the poor fellow, after his long fast, that none of them had the heart to deny him anything.

Meanwhile, between bites, he answered their many questions, the food putting him in something like a good humor again.

"We know that you came out fishing, Bandy-legs," said Max; "but tell us how you clean forgot you'd been warned not to go into the swamp. We reckoned there must have been some pretty strong attraction that made you pull up anchor and paddle like hot cakes into the place."

"Was—deer!" replied the other, as he bit into another sandwich, taking about half of it at one effort.

"Swimming in the water?" asked Max.

"Yep. Thought I c'd ketch her, more fool I was," replied the other.

"Then, when finally she got away from you, and you thought to turn around so's to paddle out of the swamp again, you saw a boat coming after you, and recognized the three fellows in it as Ted and his crowd; was that it, Bandy-legs?" and Max, who knew that they could only get snatches of the story from the half-starved boy for the present, put this in a way that really required only a nod for a reply.

"Yep, that's how it was," Bandy-legs affirmed, thickly, for his mouth was crammed full at the time, so that he was in danger of choking.

"They made all manner of threats about what they'd do to you when they overtook you, didn't they?" Max went on, and received an affirmative nod in reply.

"That was partly done to frighten you," he remarked, grimly. "They wanted you to get lost in the swamp and have a tough time of it."

"Just what they did," Bandy-legs declared, indignantly; "because, after I'd run as far as I wanted, when I'd jumped ashore, why, somehow, I didn't seem able to make my way back to my boat; and then I got lost for keeps."

"We have followed your trail a long ways, Bandy-legs, and it's been a mystery to us just how you managed to keep from getting mired for keeps," Steve declared, as he glanced down ruefully at his own muddy legs.

"Now tell us about this tree stump, and how you ever managed to get inside it," asked Owen, wise-

ly wrapping up the balance of the food, though Bandy-legs cast wistful glances at it disappearing.

"Why, it was near nighttime, and I was gettin' rattled bad," he admitted. "Just then I saw this old stump, and got a notion in my head that p'r'aps I might be able to see further away, if only I c'd climb to the top. Besides, it might be wide enough to let me sleep there. You see, I didn't like to stay on the ground, not havin' a gun along."

"Well, you climbed up, all right, of course. What happened then?" asked Max.

"The blamed old thing just fooled me, that's what. I was standing there, lookin' round, when kerflump, I went through the dead wood and rattled down inside that old stump like two-forty. Whoo, but it scared me, fellers! I'll never get over it, never! And all night, I reckoned, I'd have to stay there alone."

"Of course you shouted?" suggested Max.

"Till I was as hoarse as a crow," replied the other, sadly shaking his head; but as his eyes were following Owen, who was stowing the balance of the food away in one package, doubtless it was that which made him feel bad, rather than the troubles of the past.

"And finally some one answered you, wasn't that it?" went on Max.

"Yep, that's right," Bandy-legs declared. "It was Ted and his crowd, with a blazing torch, making their way out of the swamp. They stood around,

and kept a-pokin' fun at me for a long time. Shack Beggs pretended to be settin' the stump a-fire; an' worked me up to screamin' pitch, he gave me such a scare. Then they went off, sayin' they *might* wander 'round again next day."

"The onery skunks!" growled Steve, hotly, as he clenched his fist, and made imaginary stabs at space, where he doubtless wished Ted might happen to be at the time.

"They did come back, yesterday it must 'a' been, and stayed around a long time, havin' fun with me, I s'pose they called it. They lowered the old bread and a bottle of water by a string, and when they got tired went away, sayin' they'd come back with a rope, if they c'd get one, which Ted, he said, was doubtful."

"Then they're coming again this morning," remarked Max, with a dark look on his face.

"Ted, he said as how it might be ten o'clock before they c'd get here, it was so long a walk. He told me I ought to be thankful they didn't just go about their business, and leave me there to starve. Oh, ain't I glad you fellers came! Now they won't find me here when they show up!" and Bandy-legs sighed with infinite satisfaction at the prospect.

"Yes, they will find you here," said Max, "and four chums along with you. Boys, what d'ye say? Oughtn't we just hang around and give those cowards a lesson they've been needing a long time?"

"Oh, joy, count me in, Max!" purred Steve, glance-

ing around him; and then pouncing on what he thought was a nice stiff club that could be counted on to do considerable execution in the right kind of hands.

The others, seeing what Steve had done, hastened to copy his example. Even Mr. Jones did likewise. He did not happen to have a personal acquaintance with the boys in question; but he understood their stripe. And Mr. Jones disliked tyrants of all descriptions, whether they wore skirts or trousers.

"First of all, we want to make it look like nobody had been here since they went away yesterday," Max remarked, starting to clean up.

When this had been done he found hiding places for each one. These were close at hand; and an arrangement was made that would prevent the enemy from running off, and escaping the punishment they merited so much.

Then they settled down to waiting.

An hour passed before they heard any sounds to indicate that Ted and the other two were coming. Just as Max had suspected would be the case, they followed the general line of the course taken by himself and companions in reaching the place. But those three boys must have been very poor woodsmen, seeing that none of them seemed to note the fact of others having been over the path since they traveled it last. To them a footprint was only the mark of a shoe; and one looked like another. So, without the least suspicion that things had taken on a new front,

they came trooping along and surrounded the tree trunk in which they supposed poor Bandy-legs still stood.

For a short time they called out in all sorts of ways, trying to induce the prisoner to cry to them beseechingly. But when only a dead silence followed, the three boys began to get a little uneasy, and looked at each other.

"Say, what's gone wrong with him, d'ye think, Ted?" asked Amiel, turning white with a sudden fear that he might in some way be held accountable for the death of the poor prisoner of the stump.

"Aw, nawthin's the matter of him," replied Ted, in his coarsest manner, as though he might be trying to bolster up his own courage by showing unconcern. "Here, you, Shack, shin up that tree with the rope we fetched along, and tell the chump we reckon to h'ist him outen there. Git, now, and don't you dare answer back!"

He gave Shack a vigorous kick while speaking, as though in that way he expected to hurry him. The other immediately started to climb the tall stump. Once at the top, he put his head down and called several times into the hole that looked so dark and forbidding.

"He ain't sayin' a word, Ted!" Shack called down, with a voice that showed signs of shaking, more or less.

"Aw, rats, it's on'y his way of playin' 'possum!" called back Ted. "Say, you'll have to tie the bloom-

in' rope somehow, and drop down there to find out what's doin'."

"Why don't you send Amiel; he's the smallest," whined Shack, who evidently did not like the job cut out for him very much.

"Never mind about that, but just get busy. And say, Shack, if so be the poor little fool's gone and fainted, tie the rope under his arms, and then climb up. Like's not we'll have to yank him out of there now. The fun's busted, and the fat's all in the fire!"

"You bet it is!" shouted a voice just then, and as Ted Shafter started to whirl around in astonishment something came against his back with such tremendous force that it sent him headlong to the ground.

And then he saw that it was Steve who had wielded his cudgel with such telling effect; while Max Hastings, his cousin Owen, Toby Jucklin, yes, and the resurrected Bandy-legs Griffin, together with another party utterly unknown to him, rushed from cover and made a complete surround of himself, Amiel Toots, and the big stump, on the top of which Shack Beggs stood, shivering with a new dread as he looked down at the appearance of things.

CHAPTER XVI.

STEVE FINDS OUT—*Conclusion.*

“LET ’em have it, fellers; remember what they did to me!” shrieked Bandy-legs, as he bowled Amiel Toots over with a sturdy whack that brought out a bellow from the frightened recipient.

Max and several others were giving the unlucky Ted the best pounding he had ever had in all his life. For the moment, in their intense indignation, they forgot that they were many against one; and even the timid Mr. Jones managed to get in a single tap that appeared to afford him considerable satisfaction, as though possibly at the time he were thinking of Hannah, the other tyrant.

Finally, after they had buffeted Ted around until he was actually begging for mercy, they told him to get out; and, as he started to run off, Steve landed a splendid kick where it did the most good, and which would always be remembered by both the sender and the receiver.

Amiel had been allowed to skulk away, and now they turned their attention to Shack Beggs. He refused to come down at first, until Max threatened to climb up and push him into that black hole. Of

course he received as much punishment as they felt like meting out. He was about as mean a boy as Ted, and had long merited this sort of payment from the five chums, on account of the many practical jokes which he and the others had played on them.

Then, the coast being clear, Max and the others took up their line of march, so as to get back to where they had left the boats. Mr. Jones proved himself a valuable friend in leading them there; and Max faithfully promised the little man that he would try to smooth matters over with the partner of his joys and griefs—mostly griefs, Julius Cæsar Jones solemnly affirmed, with upraised hand.

It was late in the afternoon when they approached the house of Aunt Matilda. That lady saw them coming in the boats, and was at the dock to greet the long lost swamp wanderer. She wanted to hear the whole story, and so the boys had to promise to come up again on the next day to spend it with her.

There was no holding Steve back now. He was getting fairly wild to hasten to Carson and find out just what he had to face. And the more he talked about it the darker his feelings seemed to grow. He was almost sure now that he had never thought to turn that water off, and doubtless long before now his father's house had actually been ruined.

"If somebody'd only kick me real good and hard, so it'd hurt, I'd feel better," he said, more than once; but he looked so miserable that even fun-loving Toby did not have the heart to take him at his word.

They heard from Miss Griffin that there was an automobile only a short distance away that she believed might be hired, and gladly did she promise to foot the bill, as well as what they would have to pay Mr. Billikin, the livery stable keeper of Carson, for fetching them up to the cranberry farm.

Again was Old Black Bob brought into the game, and a wagon took the boys over to the well-to-do farmer who owned the machine. When he had read Miss Griffin's urgent plea, and heard a little of the wonderful things that had happened to the five chums, this man, who could admire pluck in boys, promptly agreed to take them over the road to Carson; in fact, he was ready to do it for nothing, because he wanted to hear the balance of the stirring story on the way.

It is not easy talking when you are flying along over the road at the rate of thirty or forty miles an hour; but between them the boys managed to describe pretty much all that had happened from the time Max received that startling wire from the troubled aunt of Bandy-legs and rushed up to find the lost one.

And now, in the gloaming, they were rapidly approaching the outskirts of the old town of Carson. Familiar objects began to be seen on every hand. Bandy-legs acted as though he had been away for a year; and perhaps the poor fellow had really suffered so much during his imprisonment in the hollow tree that it seemed that way to him.

Steve had fallen very still; and Max, who sat next to him, could feel his usually nervous chum trembling violently with suspense. He craned his neck, too, as they entered the town, and kept watching a certain point, as though all his hopes and fears were centered there.

"Don't seem to be any kind of excitement around here," Steve was muttering to himself, as he saw several persons strolling leisurely along, for the evening was rather warm.

A little farther, and he craned his neck again.

"Say, Max, tell me," he said, feebly, "is that a really true chimbley I see there above the old maples?"

"That's just what it is, Steve," replied Max, feelingly.

"Anyhow, everything couldn't a-fallen down, then," Steve went on, weakly. "But I'll soon know the worst now, because we'll turn here, and——"

He gasped for breath just then. The car had whirled around a corner, and there in full sight lay the Dowdy house. So far as anyone could see, it looked just as it usually did. Shutters were in some cases closed, and in others opened, just as Steve in his rush had left them; but it certainly did not look like the ruin the wretched boy had mentally pictured so often within the last two days.

"Wait for me here a minute, fellers!" cried the excited Steve, as he went flying out of the machine,

and up to the front door, which he could hardly open with his key, so trembling did his hands seem.

As the owner of the car was backing, so as to turn around, they heard Steve going up the steps three at a time. Then a window was raised, and his head came in view; while he made extravagant gestures with both arms.

"Congratulations, Steve!" called Max from the carriage drive.

"How is it?" shouted Owen and Bandy-legs in chorus; while Toby went through all the motions, even if he could not trust himself to speak.

"Bully!" answered the delighted boy from the window. "Everything is lovely, and the goose hangs high!"

"I see he does, as high as that bathroom window," laughed Max.

"Tell me I'm a dummy, will you?" continued Steve, as they started away; "I closed that faucet, sure I did; and I ain't half the fool some people think."

"Hurray!" yelled Toby, all of a sudden recovering his voice and standing up to wave his cap back toward Steve; but as the car made a jump just then, he suddenly vanished, being almost smothered among the cushions of the tonneau.

Well, that completed the adventure of the Great Dismal Swamp. Bandy-legs would never feel anxious to see that gloomy place in a hurry again. He had suffered all sorts of mental and bodily tortures

during the long hours of his imprisonment there, and it must always be associated with such unpleasant things in his mind.

But the boys had promised his aunt that they would all come up again on the following day, in order that she might give them a fine dinner, and listen to a recital of the strange things that had accompanied her nephew's incautious act in venturing to chase a swimming doe that he had seen crossing a neck of water bordering the swamp proper.

And Max, too, had not forgotten that he had also given his word to little Julius Cæsar Jones to look up his wife, and manage to soothe her temper, so that she would long for him to come back home, and all would be forgiven, the fatted calf killed, and the Joneses make merry.

When Aunt Matilda had heard that part of the story she laughed herself almost sick over it, and readily promised that she would assist Max in his self-assigned task of bearding the tigress in her lair, otherwise calling at the Jones home, and ascertaining whether things looked favorable for a showing-up of the prodigal husband.

When Max really met Mrs. Jones he did not wonder that the little man stood in mortal fear of his big wife. She was enough to give any ordinary sized man a fit of shivering, did he happen to cross her sweet will.

But, after all, she seemed to have something of

a heart, and was really in her way quite fond of Julius Cæsar. Aunt Matilda began operations by relating a number of stories she had heard from time to time about the awful things that had happened to those unfortunate enough to lose themselves in the Great Dismal Swamp.

And having thus warmed up things she went on to say that it was understood Mr. Jones had not been seen around for nearly a week now; and she really hoped he might not be sick.

That broke down the lonely wife's barricade, and she began to actually *cry*, saying she had been cruel to Jonesy, and that she was dreadfully afraid something terrible had happened to him, because he had never stayed away like this before.

When Max heard her declare that if she could only see her darling husband again all would be forgiven, he went right out and fastened a red bandana handkerchief to the top of the pigsty; that having been the signal arranged between him and the swamp fugitive.

And as he and Aunt Matilda drove away a little later, he begged her to just glance off toward the woods, where a lone figure was seen approaching the house. It was Mr. Jones, feeling so sure of a warm welcome that he had thrust out his chest much after the style of a pouter pigeon. He waved a hand toward them; and that was the last they saw of him at that time.

Max and his four chums were very likely to look

back to many of the queer things that had happened during their swamp experience; but they would always remember little Mr. Jones with uncommon interest, and hope that if he ever again found a necessity for fleeing to his place of refuge, where he knew Hannah could not easily follow, he might run across companions as good and true as came his way on this occasion.

Although the vacation season was now well along, Max and his four chums were looking forward to a chance to at least get together once more before school took up again.

Ted Shafter vowed revenge for the whipping which had been meted out to him up there in the swamp; but if he ever did attempt to secure this satisfaction they knew it would be through some miserable trick; for he was not brave enough to face any one of them alone and attempt to take retaliation.

Acting on the advice of Max, they kept him under surveillance as well as possible, not wanting to have him catch them unawares.

Ted was too shrewd to tell the truth about the black eye that followed his affair with Max and his chums; for he had run into a tree in his mad haste to get away after Steve kicked him. He merely declared that he had gotten it by running into some object on the country road at night. But by degrees the story leaked out, possibly Steve being unable to keep the secret; and many a sly side glance

did the boys and girls of Carson take at Ted and his dark-rimmed optic when they happened to pass him on the road.

Whether Ted Shafter would ever secure his revenge or not, only the future could tell; but the good people of Carson were becoming very weary of his antics; and it was understood in certain circles that with his very next exploit he must be severely punished. If his father could not hold him in check, then he must be sent away to a military school, where the strict discipline might break him of his bad habits. Either that or the reform school was to be the fate of Ted, unless he held himself in check.

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